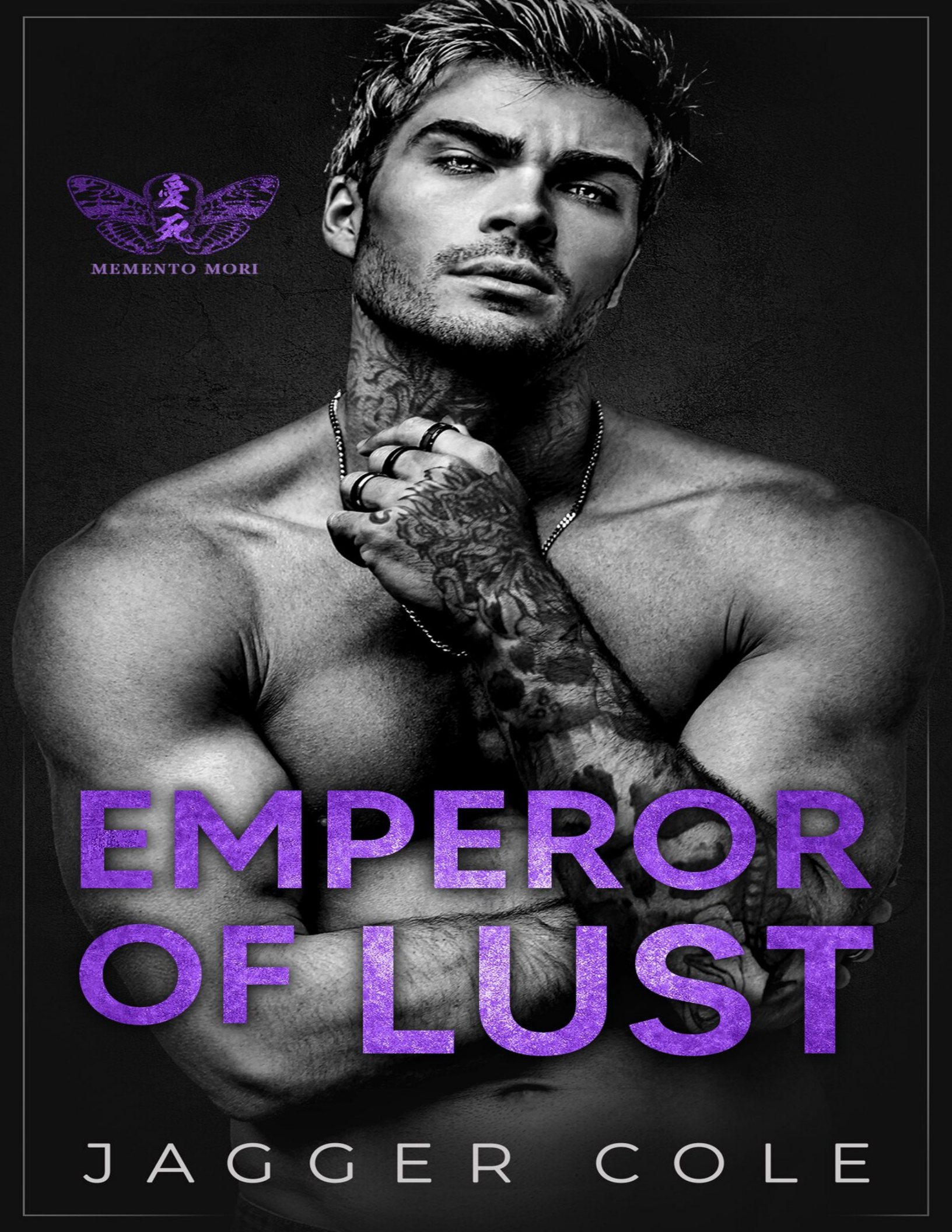
MEMENTO MORI
EMPEROR OF LUST
JAGGER COLE

EMPEROR OF LUST

A DARK MAFIA ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

JAGGER COLE

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Emperor of Lust
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Dragula - Rob Zombie
Dirty Thoughts - Chloe Adams
Do It for Me - Rosenfeld
Smoke & Trouble - Society of Villains, Sam Tinnesz
A Fragile Thing - The Cure
Digger - Great Grandpa
I WOULD DIE FOR YOU - In This Moment
In Flames - Digital Daggers
like u - Rosenfeld
Attaway - Phantogram
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TRIGGER WARNING

Dear Reader,

This book contains darker themes and graphic depictions of past trauma and SA, as well as scenes involving bondage and restraint.

While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. *Please* know your own triggers, and read with that in mind.

Thanks for reading,

Jagger

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1

HANA

SOME NIGHTS, you can feel the mayhem and the violence lingering in the shadows before it ever actually makes an appearance. You can *taste* it in the air, like a fine mist, wet on your tongue and lips.

A clamminess that bathes your skin. A little warning light flickering on and off in your peripheral vision.

The towering metal warehouse looms in the shadows of the industrial district just outside Kyoto, bathed in eerie silence and faint moonlight.

I close the car door quietly, willing my nerves to settle as I adjust my mask. I take a breath, willing that lingering feeling of mayhem back to the shadows. Shaking the mist off my skin.

Tonight is not a night of danger and violence, I remind myself. Tonight is *business*.

Tonight I'm not Hana Mori, corporate CEO and daughter of the Yakuza. I'm *The Kitsune*—a ghost, a fox, a shadow without a name.

My black stiletto heels click softly on the concrete, the sound echoing as if the darkness itself is leaning in to listen. The mask rests securely over my face, its delicate curves and painted fox markings letting me slip into a role that feels both dangerous and liberating.

This isn't the first time I've met with clients face-to-face—well, face-to-*mask*. But the thrill and the slight dash of fear sharpen my focus, as always.

With each step, I become more The Kitsune than Hana; more phantom than dutiful sister who keeps her family's empire running smoothly.

By the time I reach the side door to the cavernous warehouse, my nerves are steel. I step inside, the sound of my heels drawing the attention of the three men waiting for me inside under the lone overhead light.

Won Kyung, Ji Ahn, and Johnny Dae-Kim—three mid-level leaders of three mid-level Korean syndicate factions—glare at me with predatory, pissed-off looks as I click my way across the space toward them. I just breathe in slowly, steadying my heartbeat to a calm rhythm.

I've met with dangerous men before. I *live* with dangerous men. I call them brothers and cousin.

Still, there's no denying the particularly edged feel in the air, the dark energy hanging like a fog over this whole meeting.

"Gentlemen," I greet them, my voice filtered through the mask, smooth and unwavering. The Kitsune never falters. The Kitsune is untouchable. "Let us get down to business. You had concerns."

It's not the first time I've met with dangerous clients. It's also not the first time I've had to keep the patronizing tone out of my voice while trying to explain basic finance to men who are used to being in charge and told how smart they are.

If you'd told me a year ago that this was how I'd be spending an ordinary Wednesday night—traipsing around warehouses dressed like a spy and wearing a fox mask to engage in money-laundering business…about which my family has no fucking idea about, I might add…with some of the sketchiest men on earth—I'd have laughed in your face.

But here we are.

Johnny Dae-Kim, in the middle—mid-thirties, lean muscle, a scar tracing his cheek from eye to jaw—steps forward, lips twisted in a bitter smirk. He runs a hand over his clean jaw, and my gaze catches on the glinting red garnet stone in his gaudy gold ring. His eyes flick over me, assessing, calculating. Something dark flits through them.

“We’re disappointed, Kitsune.” His words are harsh, laced with a venom that seeps into the empty room. “Our returns have been…underwhelming.”

I ignore the surge of irritation that flares in my chest, keeping my expression steady even beneath the mask. "I assure you,” I reply calmly, “all transactions were processed exactly as agreed upon. Perhaps you’re neglecting to consider fluctuating exchange rates, or—”

“Exchange rates.” He spits the words like they’re a curse and his gaze grows darker, more dangerous, as if my words are a slap rather than a response.

I exhale slowly. “Gentlemen, there’s a reason you do business with me and not my competitors. I get things *done*. I get you the best returns for cleaning your dirty money, *and* I do it at the lowest commission of anyone else at my level.” I shrug. “If that doesn’t work for you, I’m sure my competitors would be happy to have you back.”

My lips curl slightly beneath the mask that covers the top two thirds of my face.

“At their higher fee, that is.”

Johnny’s eyes narrow. “Your commission is not the problem, Kitsune,” he growls. “The fact that you think you can cheat us certainly is.”

In the flickering light, the two men flanking him drift forward, each movement calibrated, like wolves closing in on an injured fawn. My senses sharpen, the air thickening with tension. Instinct tells me to step back, to reach for the small knife strapped under my sleeve, but I resist.

The Kitsune does not retreat.

“That’s a serious accusation,” I say, keeping my voice even, “and not one I take lightly. If there’s been a miscalculation, I am happy to go over the figures together. I’m certain—”

I don’t get the chance to finish. Johnny lunges, reaching me in an instant. His fingers dig into my arms, cold and unyielding as he yanks me forward and spins me around. The breath leaves my body as he slams me back against a wrought-iron pole, pinning me to it.

I twist violently in his grip, but before I can break free, the other two are on me, grabbing my wrists and wrenching them behind my back and around the pole.

Rope twists around my wrists.

Oh God.

A spike of blind panic shoots through me and I bite down hard, forcing it back even as it drags me beneath the surface.

Stay calm.

But the familiar sensation…rough rope pressing against my skin…biting into my wrists…sends a wave of nausea through me. Memories surge up, dark, unwelcome, dragging me back to a night I've tried so hard to erase from my mind.

The laughter. The spinning room. The rope cutting into my skin as hands pawed at me.

No. I will not let this be like before.

But the ropes tighten, and my heart hammers against my ribs, drowning out reason with every beat. *Breathe. Focus on the present*. I am not that girl anymore. I am The Kitsune, and The Kitsune doesn't break. The Kitsune—

"Look at her," Won Kyung sneers. His grip is relentless iron, his breath hot on my cheek. "The fox isn't so cunning now, is she?"

"Bitch sure came dressed to impress," Johnnyt snickers. I jolt, gasping sharply when I feel the suit jacket yanked off my shoulders and down my arms to tangle behind me against the pole. I shudder, going cold as ice when Johnny flicks open a blade and grabs a fistful of the thin blouse at my stomach, yanking it out of my pencil skirt.

The blade slips underneath. I can't even scream or fight as it slices up, removing every button as they cut the shirt open.

Fabric rips. Tears well in my eyes. My bra is cut off as they shove me to my knees on the dirty ground.

All I know is the drowning sensation. The urge to scream. To explode. To self-immolate, just to get away.

The past claws its way into my mind, dragging me down and back to that dark room, the jeering faces, the hands pinning me down as I struggled, helpless and trapped.

No matter how much I fight it off, that night's shadow is back, wrapping around me, blurring the line between past and present. A cold, creeping numbness settles over me, my mind fracturing and falling through memory and fear until I'm no longer in control.

I barely hear the words as they taunt me, their voices low and mocking, stripping away my power and dignity. One of them pulls at the edge of my mask and I turn away, trying to hide, trying to keep what little I have left. Their laughter grows louder, harsher, piercing deeper with every word.

Then, suddenly, a different sound—a door slamming open.

The laughter dies, the hands freeze on my skin. I open my eyes, blinking as I turn toward the sound.

A figure stands silhouetted in the doorway, tall and imposing, his presence filling the space with an energy that's even colder more menacing than that of the men holding me.

At first that's all he is: a dark stain of black ink against the low light outside. A malevolent fog ready to billow into the warehouse and choke us all.

But then, he steps in.

My heart lurches when I see the shock of silvery-white hair gleaming under the dim light and the violet eyes burning with a chilling intensity that lances straight through me.

Oh God…

On the surface, you'd think I'd be *thrilled* that someone I know has just appeared, bursting in like a fairytale hero at the heroine's darkest hour.

Except there's a million things wrong with that statement, the biggest one being that Damian Nikolayev is anything *but* a hero.

When my older brother Kenzo married Kir Nikolayev's pseudo-adopted daughter Annika not long ago, our family and theirs buried the hatchet to become allies: the Mori-kai and the Nikolayev Bratva, working side-by-side. Kir even expanded his business interests into Japan, first here in Kyoto, and soon into Tokyo, with our family.

But.

The man standing in the doorway isn't Kir. It's not Annika.

It's Damian, Kir's nephew. Heir to the Nikolayev throne? Yes. My brother's ally? Also yes.

But there's another word for Damian that in my opinion isn't mentioned nearly enough: *psychopath*.

The man is a fucking *psychopath*. My twin brother, Takeshi, has his own darkness inside him and his own…neurodivergent tendencies. But Damian is something else altogether.

He's malice incarnate. "Unhinged" personified. A black hole where goodness and sunlight go to die.

If those were the only reasons to be nervous about Damian Nikolayev, this would all still be fine. Unfortunately, there's one more thing Damian is:

My competition.

He doesn't know this, because he, just like everyone else who knows me, has no idea that I've been moonlighting as The Kitsune—elusive and effective money launderer for the rich and dangerous. He doesn't know that I, Hana Mori, have been stealing some of his most lucrative clients by slashing my commission rates.

I have to remind myself that he can't see who I am with this mask on as his eyes settle on me with a look that can only be described as malicious satisfaction, a smirk twisting his lips as he takes in the scene before him.

He steps forward, his movements deliberate, as if he has all the time in the world. I feel the three Koreans stiffen. Their nervousness is palpable but they don't move, caught between the instinct to run and the fatal mistake of hesitating. Damian's gaze drifts over me, lingering on the ropes binding my wrists, the torn clothes, the disarray.

My tits, which are on full display right now.

"Well, well." His voice is smooth, almost lazy, but there's a dark edge to it that settles over me like a shroud. "What do we have here?"

"We have a dumb motherfucker walking into places he doesn't belong," Johnny spits, pulling a gun from his jacket.

He struts toward Damian, grinning savagely as he raises his weapon.

"This is a party you weren't invited to, you stupid fucking—"

It happens so fast that I can barely register it. One second, Johnny is standing perhaps ten feet away from Damian. The next, the man with the silver hair, purplish eyes, and psychotic energy has slammed into him and is jamming a blade into his stomach.

Johnny howls, clutching his bleeding abdomen and sinking to the floor as Damian yanks the blade out. The two others lunge toward him, pulling their own guns out. But instantly Damian's knife flings, catching Ji Ahn in the throat.

Damian's on his prey in a second, slamming into him and yanking the blade free with an arc of crimson. My eyes bulge wide, my throat tight and my pulse roaring as he whirls, spins the blade around, and drives it to the hilt into Won Kyung's chest. The Korean's eyes start from their sockets and his mouth falls open. Damian removes the blade, watching with almost a bored expression as the man drops to the ground in a heap next to his buddy.

The silence that follows is deafening, the air still and thick with death. Time feels slowed as Damian casually turns to glance behind him.

"Hmm."

My throat works as I follow his gaze to the bloody puddle where Johnny was lying on the ground, which has turned into bloody footprints leading out the side door.

“I don’t envy you in your current position.”

I flinch, ripping my gaze back to Damian and taking in the slow, predatory smile curling his lips as he looks at me.

I stare at him, every nerve flickering with a mix of terror and defiance. He steps slowly and methodically over the men he’s just killed, as if admiring his own violence. His gaze sweeps over me with a dark satisfaction, taking in the mask, the ropes, the ruined state of my clothes. The dim light glints in his violet eyes, giving him an otherworldly look.

“So… The Kitsune is a *woman*.” His voice, low and smooth, slips through the darkness, each syllable laced with dark amusement. “You’ve been making quite the mess of things…*Kitsune*.” He circles me, the bloody knife in his hand.

I keep my gaze steady, refusing to let him see the panic clawing at the edges of my control. “I don’t know who you think you’ve found,” I say, forcing steel into my voice and hoping to God he doesn’t recognize me, “but I assure you, my business is none of your concern.”

A quiet laugh escapes him, as cold as the look in his eyes. “On the contrary,” he murmurs, stepping close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from him, a stark contrast to his icy expression. “You’ve been meddling in my affairs. *Stealing* my clients.” His gaze sharpens and his tone dips, becomes more lethal. “And that,” he says softly, “is *very much* my concern.”

He moves closer, reaching out, his fingers grazing the edge of my leather mask along my cheek. It’s just the lightest touch, yet it sends a shiver down my spine, an icy jolt that freezes me in place.

If he takes the mask off, it all explodes in my face.

No one knows I’ve been doing this.

Kenzo's been so focused on building the Mori-kai into a dominant empire and allying with the Nikolayev Bratva, not to mention expanding into Tokyo, that he hasn't been paying attention to the state of our finances.

Nobody has, except *me*.

Expanding takes money. Building an empire takes even more. That's the only reason I've been doing this. At the end of the day, Kenzo's doing what he's supposed to do: leading our family empire into a bigger, bolder future. And it's my job to make sure everything runs smoothly as we grow.

That's how I got into this side business in the first place: we needed the money, and I, frankly, know how to do this better than any of the competition. So for the last four months, I've been funneling dirty money through my family's legitimate businesses, taking a cut of it, and paying out clean cash to psychos like Johnny.

If Damian unmasks me, they'll all know what I've been doing. Not just conducting business with people we consider enemies. But they'll know that our family's cash flow problem came up under what's supposed to be my watchful eye.

I can't have that. I won't. In fact, there's almost nothing I wouldn't do to make sure that *does not* happen.

Damian's lips curl dangerously as he slips a finger under the edge of my mask, as if to lift it away.

"*No*."

The word tumbles out before I can stop it, a quiet plea I hadn't intended to voice.

Damian's eyes shine with something dark, realization dawning slowly in them. His hand pauses, and instead of pulling the mask away he lets his fingers trace the line of my jaw, a deliberate, lingering touch that sends sparks dancing across my skin.

"I'm not sure you realize just how weak your negotiating position is, Kitsune," he says, his voice dropping to a murmur, rich and mocking. He presses his thumb against my bottom lip, pulling it down slightly, exposing

the sharp edge of my teeth. “Who’s behind the mask, hmm?” His gaze bores into me, amethyst eyes filling with interest as he watches my lips part, his thumb grazing back and forth across my bottom lip.

It happens without my brain even commanding it.

My tongue flicks over his thumb.

The contact is barely a breath, yet it fills the space between us with a charge so intense I can almost hear it, an electric hum of tension filtering through the silence.

I don’t know what possessed me. But in that space between us, something wild and thrilling and terrifying rushes through me like a hot pulse when I do it, turning my cheeks pink.

Damian lifts an eyebrow, his mouth twisting into a predatory, amused smile. “Oh my…” His voice is a low rumble, laced with condescension. “Was that your pathetic attempt at *seduction*, Kitsune?”

Heat rushes to my cheeks, my mind racing to explain what made me do it. I try to look away, but he holds my chin firmly, his thumb tracing the curve of my lower lip. There’s nowhere to hide from his scrutiny, or the slow, cruel smirk spreading across his face as he studies me.

Before I can find my voice he draws his hand away, keeping his fingers where they are for a heartbeat before releasing me entirely. He lifts the knife again, and I gasp when he touches the still-bloody tip of it against my neck. A throbbing knot forms in my core, my body humming with an energy I don’t quite understand as he drags the tip of the blade over my jugular.

“A pity,” he sighs, his tone tinged with mock sadness. “Such a pretty mouth. Such a work of art, all tied up like this.”

My heart thuds faster, desperation clawing to the surface. If I don’t give him a reason to keep me alive right now, he’ll kill me without hesitation.

I swallow hard, grasping for anything that might convince him to let me live. “Wait—” I whisper, the word edged with a fear I can’t suppress.

He cocks his head, pretending to think for a moment. “No.”

The word is blunt, almost dismissive, but I catch the faintest flicker of interest as his gaze lingers on the ropes, the mask, my exposed breasts, their nipples stiff. It's a glimmer of something I might be able to use, if I'm willing to pay the price.

I take a shaky breath, my mind scrambling to find anything that will shift the balance of power even slightly. "If it's the business you're worried about, I'll drop every client I've taken from you."

He pauses. His gaze never leaves my face. There's a cruelly curious glint in his eyes and I know he's listening, if only to see how far I'll go. "Is that right?" he murmurs, his tone deceptively casual. "And?"

I swallow nervously. "*And*?"

"To spare us both a drawn-out guessing game, Kitsune," he murmurs darkly, his eyes dropping to my breasts again, "I'll be blunt." His gaze lifts to mine, piercing through the mask. "You fucked with my business." His lips curl maliciously. "Perhaps I should fuck *you*."

The words shock through my system, sucking the air from my lungs and turning my blood gelid as I stare at him.

"You can't be serious."

Damian's head cocks to the side. "Oh, but I am," he growls almost playfully.

Something cold shudders up my spine and my head shakes stiffly side to side.

"No."

Not that. Not…*that*-that.

Not sex.

I swallow again as I stare up at him, my hands bound behind me and the cold of the concrete seeping into my kneecaps.

Damian is, objectively speaking, good-looking. Okay, that's putting it mildly. He's savagely attractive. *Dangerously* so. Like, in a serial killer way

—as if his looks have been specifically designed to reel in the unaware and unprepared so he can devour them whole.

But I'm neither unaware nor unprepared. I may not know Damian well, but I've been around him and *seen* that look in his eyes; that thirst for violence and blood. I've seen it in my twin brother's eyes our whole lives. Maybe that's why I'm not scared of "dangerous" men: I've grown up with them.

My eyes drag down his chiseled, sharp jawline and the smug, dark smile on his face. His supernaturally purplish eyes and silver hair, thanks to a rare genetic condition. His height, broad shoulders, muscled arms and tattoo ink.

But no matter how striking he is…*no*. Not just because I can't even begin to wrap my head around the horrifying concept of screwing someone to avoid being killed by them. But because…

I gulp.

Because the last few times I've even attempted to have sex after what happened *that* night, I went into full-blown panic attacks.

A shudder rips through me as I stare up at him.

"No?" His voice is heavy with pure amusement. "Such a pity, Kitsune," he sighs, touching the tip of the knife to my chin, lifting my gaze to his with it. "I thought we'd be able to put our differences aside and have some fun…"

"Wait!" I whimper.

"Afraid not."

"My mouth!"

The words escape my throat in a rush.

Damian stills as I feel my face throb with heat.

"You…you can use my mouth," I mumble.

His brow arches.

"No…you know…"

“*Fucking* you?” he finishes for me.

My face turns even hotter as I nod stiffly. “Yeah. I mean, no. No…sex.”

“But you’re fine with me fucking your mouth,” he purrs.

I glare up at him.

“I didn’t say I was *fine* with it. I said you *could*.”

“Semantics,” he scoffs, cocking his head. His eyes slide over me. “Who *is* behind that mask, I wonder…”

My pulse jangles as he reaches for the edge of my mask again. Just before he touches my cheek, I jerk my face away.

“That’s not part of the deal.”

Damian chuckles darkly. “I’m holding a knife. Meanwhile you’re tied up with your tits out. I’m not sure you understand who’s in a position of power here, but, spoiler, it’s not you.”

I purse my lips. “The mask stays on. That’s the deal.”

He smiles darkly. “How kinky. And my cock goes between those pretty lips.”

I blush fiercely. “*Yeah*,” I mumble, my pulse thundering in my ears.

“And it obviously goes without saying, you’re done stealing my business,” he growls.

I nod. “It won’t happen again.”

“Oh, I know it won’t.”

He reaches out, letting his fingertip trace my jawline before his thumb runs over my bottom lip again.

His gaze floats over me with a predatory gleam that sends a shiver down my spine, the agreement hanging between us like a silent contract in the quiet of the warehouse. My heart pounds, each beat a reminder of how close

I’m dancing with my own mortality here. But at the same time, I feel a dark, exhilarating rush.

Damian’s smile widens, his eyes flickering with satisfaction as his thumb pulls my bottom lip open.

“Very well, Kitsune,” he murmurs. “Let’s see if you’re as good with your mouth as you are at stealing from me.”

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2

HANA

My breathing is shallow, my mind still spinning from the devil's deal I just made, one I can't even really believe, although I think it might be the only way out.

Because…again…I can *see* the blackness that lurks under Damian's beautiful, charismatic exterior. I can sense the psychotic beast waiting to lunge from the shadows.

His gaze holds mine, his violet eyes burning with cold, cruel satisfaction, like he feels he's won a game I didn't even realize we were playing. The unspoken hangs in the air between us, each quiet breath a reminder the consequences of my choice are now his to deliver.

He takes a step closer, looming over me, a faint smirk on his lips as his eyes slide over me. He sheathes his knife behind his back before his hand reaches for me. I shiver as he reaches down, tracing a slow, possessive line along my jaw, his thumb grazing over my lips, pulling them open slightly, his gaze intent as he studies the way my breath catches and sees the subtle tremor I can't suppress.

"You're shaking," he murmurs, his voice like velvet and steel. "Weren't you just negotiating a moment ago? Whatever happened to the clever, wily Kitsune?"

He lets his thumb press a little harder into my bottom lip, his eyes sparking as I feel my pulse speed up and heat spread through me despite myself. This

isn’t like anything I’ve ever known. It’s certainly not anything I should want—

I stiffen as the thought bleeds through my psyche.

Do I, in fact, want this?

I open my mouth to say words I haven’t even put together yet. But something in his gaze and his touch traps me, pinning me in place. I realize with a mix of horror and dark fascination that I’m responding to him, held under his spell even more powerfully than I am by the ropes binding my wrists.

That’s when the second realization hits me: I’m not freaking out about being bound.

That’s a first since the night of terror.

Before, when Johnny and his pals were shoving me against this pole and yanking my arms behind my back, I was practically entering a catatonic state. I was spiraling.

But I’m not now—now, when I should be spiraling even *harder*, because suddenly it’s not just having my arms tied or my body pinned helplessly. Now there’s an overtly sexual element to it as well, which should have me diving into absolute freak-out land.

I’m not.

And that’s…unexpected.

My pulse thrums wildly as I kneel there, bound and exposed, my breath catching as Damian’s gaze travels over me, dark and unyielding. He towers above me, the picture of predatory elegance, his violet eyes gleaming dangerously.

His mouth curls into a satisfied smirk, reminding me of the power he wields.

The control I’ve surrendered.

In this moment, I am not The Kitsune, untouchable and unseen; I am a woman on her knees, vulnerable to the whims of a man who could take everything from me, up to and including my life.

Damian reaches for his belt buckle, his other hand still tracing my jaw and lip. I watch through the mask, my eyes widening as I see the bulge under his dark jeans throb. The belt undoes with a cold metallic jangle, the sound bouncing around the empty warehouse.

He undoes the button, then draws the zipper down.

My breath catches.

He's not wearing underwear, and as the zipper tugs lower, I see him. *All* of him.

It just…keeps going.

My pulse thuds as I watch him slide his hand into his jeans and wrap his fingers around his cock. The tattooed muscles of his forearm flex as he strokes himself in time with his thumb across my lip, sending a disturbingly warm pulse through my core.

His arm flexes again as he pulls his cock free, and my face pales.

Holy. *Fuck*.

I'm hardly a poster girl for experience. But fucking *shit*.

Damian's huge, almost alarmingly so. I stare, my mouth hanging open a little as my gaze fixes on the thick cock in his fist. He strokes himself lazily, making the veins throb and the swollen head pulse barely inches from my face.

I shiver as he tugs my bottom lip down with his thumb.

"Let's see that tongue, Kitsune."

I swallow thickly. Then I obey, almost like I'm in trance. My mouth opens a little wider, and my tongue sticks out past my lips.

"*Good girl*."

There’s a needy tug at something dark inside of me. I try desperately to shove it back into a quiet little corner.

I can’t.

He strokes himself as he pushes his hips forward. His thumb drags my lip down again, then cups my jaw, pulling my mouth open as he lets the swollen head of his thick cock slide over my lips.

He tastes sweet and a little salty. He smells like citrus and bergamot and clean linen. Which twists something in my head, because a devil like him *should* reek of sulfur, brimstone, and captured souls.

He looks at me like he wants to devour me whole as he opens my mouth a little more and pushes his swollen dick past my lips and over my tongue.

I gag almost instantly. Damian’s lips curl in dark amusement as he draws back a little, letting the head rub over my bottom lip, smearing it with precum.

“Let’s try that again,” he growls before unceremoniously shoving his cock back into my mouth.

This time, I somehow manage to suppress the gag reflex when his sheer size invades my mouth. I shudder as he thrusts, his jaw tight as he slides back out again, rubbing his head over my lips before he sinks back between them.

“Now *suck*, little Kitsune,” he growls.

I nod, letting my lips close around his cock. My cheeks hollow slightly as I suck, swirling my tongue over his crown. Damian tilts his head, regarding me with a mixture of curiosity and dark hunger. His hand tangles in my hair and he pulls just hard enough to make my heart stumble. A quiet gasp escapes me, and his mouth curves, his amusement deepening at my reaction.

“Good,” he murmurs. “Just like that.”

The next moment, he thrusts inside again, not bothering to let me figure out the right rhythm, just doing it himself. His hips roll as he starts to pump in

and out, literally fucking my mouth as I sit there on my knees with my hands bound to the pole behind my back.

He uses me exactly as he pleases, every movement controlled and deliberate, a reminder of who holds the power. The hand in my hair tightens, guiding me, pulling me against him as he pushes against the back of my throat, gagging me again. Spit dribbles down my chin and my pulse roars as an unbidden and maybe a little unhinged feeling tickles in my core.

Forbidden heat pools between my thighs.

Damian groans deeply, thrusting again in a rhythm that's at once commanding and impossibly intimate. I can feel his heat, sense the tension coiling in his muscles, the way he lets himself slowly savor every reaction he wrings from me. It's as if he's testing me, pushing me, and with each passing second my pulse beats faster, my body caught in the grip of a dark thrill that feels impossible to deny.

Damian is relentless, his grip on me growing more demanding and his movements more intense as he explores every scrap of control he holds over me. I'm trapped in this strange, twisted intimacy, each passing moment blurring the line between submission and resistance further, and I can feel myself slipping deeper into the darkness between us.

His hand slides from my hair and drifts along my jaw, his fingers tracing a slow path over my cheek and down my throat. His grip turns firmer as he wraps his fingers around my windpipe.

It's as if every touch is intended to test my resolve and see how far I'll go to keep our agreement. There's a heat and a satisfaction in his gaze that sends a tremor through me, and though my face is hidden by the mask, I can feel myself totally exposed and laid bare under his scrutiny.

"There's a good, obedient Kitsune," he growls. "Such a pretty little cocksucker I've found."

I want to hate the crude, filthy words that tumble from his lips.

Instead, I just feel that same forbidden tug inside of me. That same confusing sense of need, swirling with the bewildering feeling of *not* losing control from being tied right now.

He lets the fingers of his other hand wander, reaching down to cup one of my breasts. Part of me wants to scream that this wasn't part of our deal.

Another part of me just shivers and finds herself squeezing her thighs together as his fingers mercilessly pinch and twist a sensitive nipple.

He does it again and again, alternating between my breasts, keeping my nipples electrified and throbbing as he fucks my mouth. He pinches down hard on one, pulling it up toward him and wringing a small, strangled sound from my throat.

He growls, thrusting harder, faster, deeper.

"When I come, Kitsune," he murmurs darkly, "you're going to be a good girl and swallow every drop."

I nod, my eyes locked with his through the mask as I look up at him, letting him use my mouth in this insanely demeaning way that somehow has me *incredibly* turned on.

He thrusts harder, ramming his cock into the back of my mouth with an urgency that's both terrifying and thrilling, like he literally can't control himself anymore. My core throbs as he brutalizes my nipples, sending electric currents zapping through my body as he stretches my jaw to its limit around his thick cock.

There's no warning when he comes. One second, he's thrusting into my mouth. The next, he buries himself and goes still, his jaw clenched tight as his cock swells to iron between my lips. It pulses and jerks, and I mewl in surprise as the thick ropes of salty cum spill across my tongue.

He's still exploding into my mouth as his thumb slips up to run along my jawline and the edge of my mask.

I don't realize it's happening until it's too late.

I try to pull back, but his other hand winds into my hair, holding me in place with undeniable force, my lips still wrapped around his cock. Slowly, almost lazily, he tugs at the edge of the mask, lifting it just enough to make me aware of the loss of my last defense.

“No more games, *Kitsune*,” he whispers. “Let’s see who you really are.”

With a single, decisive motion, he tears the mask from my face, letting it fall to the floor, my identity exposed in the dim light of the warehouse.

The chilly air hits my skin, stark and unforgiving.

Damian groans, his cock throbbing against my tongue as one last pulse of cum spills into my mouth, and his eyes widen.

Everything stops cold. He stares down at me, and I look up at him.

He makes no move to pull his still-hard cock from between my lips, or even to let go of my face or my hair.

The silence stretches out taut and heavy as he studies me, examining every reaction, every trace of shock and fear that flickers across my face. There’s a shift in his expression, a faint smile that appears on his lips as he realizes just how much power he now holds, how deeply he’s unraveled me.

His fingers brush against my cheek as if to confirm that I’m real. I can see the spark of delight in his gaze, the dark satisfaction that sends a shiver down my spine.

“Well, Hana,” he murmurs, my name rolling off his tongue with a quiet intimacy that’s both exhilarating and terrifying. “Isn’t this an interesting surprise.”

And I realize in this moment that the fox has been caught, and I’m not sure if I’ll ever escape.

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3

HANA

THE FAMILIAR HILLS above Kyoto stretch out beyond my window, bathed in the light of a half-moon. I pace the length of my bedroom, my steps soft on the tatami mats, arms wrapped tightly around myself, as if doing so could somehow hold together the pieces that feel dangerously close to shattering.

My mind spins, replaying the night in the warehouse. The heat of Damian's hands. The moment he—*oh God*—peeled away my mask.

His cum on my tongue. His eyes burning into mine. That dark, glinting smile.

I stop, squeezing my arms tighter as a shiver runs through me. *Damian fucking Nikolayev* knows who and what I am.

Not just that I'm The Kitsune.

That alone would be bad enough. But worse, he knows my darkness.

He doesn't just have the money laundering to hang over my head now—he's got the vivid image of me on my fucking knees, swallowing his cock, hands bound behind my back.

My face burns crimson as I squeeze my eyes shut, inhaling deeply. I can still feel his breath against my ear, hear the soft, mocking whisper that sent a thrill of terror and excitement down my spine.

"Don't think for a moment that this ends here."

After he was done filling my mouth, he pulled out and wiped the head of his cock across my lips. Then he walked behind me and simply cut the ropes, his movements calm, almost gentle, before he leaned into my ear and purred those damning words.

“Don’t think for a moment that this ends here.”

After that, he simply slipped into the shadows, leaving me alone, still kneeling on the warehouse floor and tasting him on my lips, my wrists throbbing where the rope had bitten into my skin.

And then I drove home in silence, everything else a blur, my thoughts wrapped around me like chains I couldn’t break.

Now, standing in my neat bedroom, everything around me in fastidious order, I feel more lost than I have in years. I’ve built this life carefully, each decision a deliberately placed brick in a structure meant to protect me and my family.

And now, in a single moment, with a single action, Damian’s destroyed the whole thing.

I cross to the bathroom, my hands shaking as I turn on the tap and splash cold water over my face. The shock of it clears my head, but only for a moment. I can still taste him, faintly sweet and salty, a mark I can’t erase. The thought makes me flush, my pulse racing with a confusing mix of shame and excitement. I hate that even now, my skin hums with the memory of the thrill he pulled from me.

Swallowing hard, I reach for my toothbrush and start scrubbing away the last reminder of his presence. It’s not just for hygiene. It’s that I want to erase any trace of him, any proof that he’s managed to affect me in ways I never anticipated. Yet as I stare at my reflection, cheeks flushed, eyes wide and still a little dazed, the weight of his gaze descends on me all over again.

I force myself to take a breath, willing my hands to remain steady as I brush my bleach-blonde hair into its usual, immaculate style, without a single strand out of place. I reapply a hint of makeup, still unable to meet my own refection in the mirror.

This is *not* the time to fall apart. I have a meeting to attend, one Kenzo mentioned earlier, before I made my ill-fated trip to the warehouse. He didn't give me details, only said that it concerned Mori-kai business and that he'd need me there.

Now paranoia sets in, and I wonder if somehow he knows—if he suspects the tangled web of deals I've woven under his nose, the careful laundering I've done to keep our empire steady.

I take another shaky breath.

He doesn't know anything, I tell myself, straightening my shoulders. *Nobody does.*

No one in my family has a clue about the insane measures I've taken to keep things stable, the secrets I've taken on to maintain our position. And no one needs to find out—not now, not ever.

I pull on a sleek black blazer and fitted pants, trying to shoehorn myself back into the role I know best: the composed, reliable sister, the one who's always in control.

I leave my room, making my way down the quiet hallway, past the quiet, empty rooms of the mansion's east wing. The Mori family residence is a sprawling, gorgeous mix of both modern elegance and traditional Japanese architecture that Kenzo "liberated" about a year ago from one of our enemies. It perches high above Kyoto, nestled among the hills like a hidden citadel, its towering walls and manicured grounds designed to hide it from the prying eyes of anyone who might even think to intrude.

I pass through the central hall, glancing out the big picture windows toward the guest house in the distance where Mal and Freya live, and the enormous garage to my left, where Takeshi is almost certainly working on one of his "ladies." Takeshi's private workshop is practically a shrine to his collection of racing motorcycles, each customized to the point of barely being street-legal.

Focus, I tell myself. Kenzo is expecting me, and if he notices even a flicker of anything unusual, he'll pry, and I don't know if I'm steady enough yet to answer.

I enter the western-style living room, my stomach clenching when I see not just Kenzo there but the entire family. Annika sits beside him, her blue eyes meeting mine with a hint of curiosity. Freya is there too, sitting on Mal's lap in one of the leather high-backed chairs by the fireplace. Kai, Kenzo's head of security and close confidant, sits next to them, his large frame sprawled across half of a couch.

Takeshi, who is apparently *not* with his bikes, is leaning against the sill of the huge window overlooking one of the koi ponds outside, his muscled, tattooed arms folded and his face unreadable. Sota, the now semi-retired Yakuza *Oyabun* who acted like a father to Kenzo, Mal, Tak, and me for years, smiles and dips his chin. I force the most normal-ish smile I can muster back at him before I glance back to Kenzo, frowning.

Sorta thought this was a one-on-one meeting.

My older brother clears his throat, his eyes not quite meeting mine. There's a stiffness in his expression that sends a prickle of unease through me. "This, uh… This concerns the whole family," he says quietly, as if reading my question telepathically.

He's *still* not meeting my gaze.

I look to Takeshi, but he just shrugs. "No idea. Guy didn't tell me shit."

Kenzo shifts, his fingers drumming lightly against his knee, a tell-tale sign of impatience in him. I frown, taking a step closer. "Kenzo, what—"

The door opposite where I'm standing swings open, and every head in the room turns as Kir Nikolayev strides in, his presence filling the room with a commanding gravitas. His second-in-command, Isaak, follows a step behind him. Kir's face is calm and controlled, his eyes sharp as they scan the room, and he gives Kenzo a quick nod before taking a seat in the armchair nearest the fireplace.

I didn't realize Kir was back in Kyoto from New York, which he calls home most of the time these days. At the same time, it doesn't surprise me that he's here. Kir and Kenzo have spent months solidifying the alliance between the Mori-kai and the Nikolayev Bratva. Still, his arrival sends a wave of panic skittering through me.

Not because of him. Because of his fucking nephew.

Damian.

Isaak stands behind Kir, his expression impassive as he takes in the room with a gaze that misses nothing. I force myself to breathe and remain composed as I meet Kir's eyes, giving a slight nod of acknowledgment. His gaze holds mine for a few seconds, a softness in his eyes as he offers a small hint of a smile and a nod of his chin.

It wasn't that long ago that Kir, Freya, and I were trapped in a bunker: hostages of a ghost from Mal's past.

Kir almost died down there in that hole. So did Freya and I. But it's because of us that Kir's even still alive, and he's never missed a chance since to remind me that he considers himself in debt to me.

"We'll start without him," Kir says, his voice low but firm as he pulls his gaze from me. "He'll be along soon."

My mind snags on the word *he*. A slow, heated blush creeps up my cheeks before I can stop it and I glance away, praying no one notices.

Perfect, I think darkly. *Of course, Damian is coming to this meeting, too.*

I feel the weight of the room settle on my shoulders, the anticipation thickening as Kir gets comfortable in his armchair. Kenzo's gaze flicks toward me but he still avoids my eyes, something hanging between us that I can't yet name.

"As you all know," Kenzo clears his throat, his gaze shifting to the family gathered around him. "We've been trying to expand the Mori-kai's and Nikolayev Bratva's influence in Tokyo. We've made progress, but it's been…slower than we anticipated."

I clasp my hands together tightly, aware that everyone in the room is familiar with the challenges we've faced.

Kenzo glances at me, his expression somber. "Kolya Ishida has made it clear that we're not welcome in Tokyo. He's tightened the Ishida-kai's grip on the city, making it nearly impossible for anyone else to gain a toehold.

Every attempt we've made has either met with resistance or been outright dismantled."

Kolya Ishida. I've heard enough stories about him and the kind of power he wields to feel a faint chill each time he's mentioned. The head of the Ishida-kai is half-Russian from his Bratva father, and half-Japanese from his Yakuza mother, who was disowned by her family for running off with a *gaijin*.

After his father was killed, Kolya grew up fighting on the streets of Russia, clawing his way up in a world that owed him nothing. But years later, he returned to Tokyo and did what no one thought possible—he reclaimed his mother's name and birthright and took control of the Ishida-kai.

Now, they say he rules with a brutality that's almost mythical—hence his nickname: *Yuki no Akuma*, the Snow Demon. He's carved out an impenetrable territory in Tokyo, and even *we're* forced to watch from the fringes, unable to gain a foothold.

Kenzo takes a deep breath, his voice steady but cautious. "However, we may have a way in. Miyamoto Katō, head of the Katō-kai, has indicated he's interested in an alliance with us. He's looking to step down and transfer his influence and territory to a trusted family who can maintain what he's built."

A flicker of surprise ripples around the room.

"It's not entirely out of the blue," Kenzo continues. "Our father, Hideo…" He turns to nod to Sota out of respect. "Helped Miyamoto in his early days, and gave him the resources to secure his first territory. He's been in our debt ever since, and now he's offering to repay us by letting us take over his network as he retires."

Fuck. This is *huge*. Kenzo's right, too: if we secure the Katō-kai's territory and manpower, that's a giant step into Tokyo, even with Ishida-kai pushback.

"Hana," Kenzo says, his gaze finally landing on me. "You'll handle the Tokyo branch of Mori Holdings, open the new corporate offices, and establish our position there. We're starting with our legitimate businesses to

build relationships with local officials and allies. Once we're secure, we'll bring in the, ah, rest of our operations."

A surge of adrenaline pulses through me.

Hell yes.

Yet even as I nod, excitement twisting in my chest, I notice Kenzo's expression turning serious, his gaze flicking to Kir before he continues.

"The thing is…" Kenzo's voice is caged. "The Yakuza in Toyko is… traditional. *Extremely* traditional."

A low growl rumbles from Mal's corner of the room, where Freya is perched on his knee. "Meaning?"

Kenzo exhales slowly. "Meaning guys like Miyamoto and the other older *Oyabuns* in Tokyo may not be willing to work with Hana…"

The realization hits me like a ton of bricks. "Are you kidding?" I snap, feeling the heat of indignation rise to my face. "Because I'm a woman?!"

Kenzo's voice softens as he meets my gaze. "Because you're an *unmarried* woman," he says quietly.

I feel the blood drain from my face.. A bitter sting of resentment flares in my chest.

The room falls silent, but that silence shatters almost immediately as the door swings open…

And *Damian* enters.

His presence sweeps into the room like a cold gust of wind. He pauses just inside the door and instantly, his purple eyes snap to mine.

A dark, knowing smile dances at the edges of his lips as he takes in my expression, my flushed cheeks, the way my fists are clenched at my sides. As he sees the way my very spirit shrinks inside me—and yes, I'm confident this demon of a man can peer right into my fucking soul.

I feel my face…no, *all of me*…burn under his gaze. He sends a dark, cold, malevolent grin my way, as if watching a replay of what happened earlier

on the projector screen that is my face.

I swallow uncomfortably, my pulse hammering in my ears as I look away from him. And yet, something malicious draws my gaze again. My eyes traitorously slink back to him, and when they do, I shudder. He's still looking right at me.

Replaying all of it.

Re-watching my submission.

My utter helplessness.

"You're late."

Kir's voice isn't angry, more like merely stating the obvious as he glances at Damian and nods to the chair next to him.

"Have a seat. Kenzo was just explaining the Tokyo…situation," he says smoothly.

Damian's eyebrow arches as he looks at Kenzo, a hint of curiosity in his eyes. Kenzo glances between him and me, a flicker of discomfort crossing his face, but he soldiers on.

"To reiterate," Kenzo says, his voice steady as he addresses Damian. "Hana will handle the expansion in Tokyo. But the Tokyo families aren't likely to work with her unless…" He hesitates, his gaze darting between Damian and me before he continues. "Unless she's married."

I feel my pulse stutter.

"Wait, I seriously have to get fucking *married* for Miyamoto and those other old fuckers to work with us?!"

Kenzo finally turns to me, his gaze steady, though his eyes hold a hint of an apology. "At the very least, you need to be engaged for Miyamoto to consider working with us," he says quietly. "Maybe not because of his own ideas about gender in the Yakuza world, but it does matter to the other families he works with or who have allegiance to him." Kenzo exhales deeply. "Bottom line, we don't get into Tokyo without Miyamoto and his connections."

The words hang in the air, each one settling over me with a cold finality that makes my chest feel tight. Engaged. *Married*. The implications are suffocating, and I hear the blood pounding in my ears as I glance frantically around the room, looking for any other possible solution that doesn't entail *this*.

"Hold the fuck up," Takeshi snarls, pushing abruptly away from the window ledge and glaring at our brother. "Are you out of your fucking *mind*?! You're going to marry her off—"

"I'm not doing anything of the sort," Kenzo snaps back, his jaw tight as he levels a hard, warning look at Takeshi. "As I said, she only needs to be engaged, and it obviously isn't going to be real."

"You're seriously suggesting that Hana gets fake engaged to appease this guy," Annika mutters next to my brother, staring at her husband like he's just grown a second head.

"Are you suggesting it would be better for her to *actually* get engaged?" Kenzo fires back.

Annika gives him a look that has his face instantly softening. He reaches out and puts a hand on hers before he turns to face the rest of us.

"It won't be real," he growls. "But to appease Miyamoto and the other bigger families, and get us into Tokyo, yes." He looks right at me. "You need to be engaged."

"*To*??" I blurt, the words tumbling out before I can stop them.

Kenzo glances at Kir, and suddenly the pieces fall horribly into place, each one more neatly positioned than the last. I glance to Kenzo, then to Kir…

Then to Damian.

No.

His lips twitch with a faint smirk, but there's something unreadable in his gaze, darkly amused, almost triumphant. And then Kenzo speaks, his voice quiet, the resignation in his tone only deepening the chill settling over me.

“To Damian,” he says, the words striking with the force of a hammer. “You’re getting engaged to Damian.”

My world shatters in an instant. The room feels too small, too cold, and the weight of my brother’s words presses down on me too heavily, squeezing the air from my lungs.

Everything explodes into chaos. Annika is yelling at Kenzo. Takeshi is balling up his fists and storming toward him. Mal is yelling, and Isaak suddenly jumps up to stop Freya from lunging at Kir.

Me, I’m just numb, frozen, in a horrified state of shock as I turn to the man who just hours ago had me on my knees, at his mercy.

Damian isn’t yelling. He’s not even moving. He’s just sitting back in his chair, surrounded by the chaos like he was born to it, looking right at me. He smiles, a slow, dangerous curve to his lips that says he hasn’t forgotten the power he now holds over me.

Not for a second.

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4

HANA

THE ROOM IS PIN-DROP silent as Damian, Kir, and Isaak file out the door, letting it shut behind them.

I'm still sitting utterly frozen, my head swimming as I try and process the impossible weight of what Kenzo has just told us.

Across the room, Takeshi's eyes blaze as he paces the floor. Mal sits near him, his jaw set, gazing into the middle distance. Beside him, Freya rubs his back, her own expression a mix of disbelief and fury. Annika pulls her gaze to me, but I pretend I don't see it and keep staring blankly into a space about two feet in front of me.

I don't know how long we sit like this, but Takeshi is the first to break the silence.

"You can't be fucking serious, Kenzo." His voice is simmering with barely controlled anger, each word cutting through the quiet. "Damian is a psychopath, and you want Hana to pretend she's fucking *engaged* to him? Do you realize how insane that sounds?"

Kenzo doesn't flinch. He meets Takeshi's glare with a calm steadiness that only infuriates our brother more. "We don't have a choice," he says firmly. "The subject is closed."

Takeshi's gaze shifts to me, filled with a fierce protectiveness bordering on rage. "And Hana? What happens to her? You're just…throwing her to the wolves?!"

Kenzo lets out a heavy sigh, his gaze drifting to me, a faint shadow of remorse in his eyes. “This alliance is crucial, Takeshi. Miyamoto’s support is the difference between success and failure in Tokyo. You know that.” He pauses, glancing at me with a gravity that sends a chill through me.

“So *fuck* Tokyo, man!” Takeshi roars. “If the cost is our fucking sister, then we walk away from it!”

I sit silently, caught between Takeshi’s anger and Kenzo’s unwavering conviction, my own emotions a tangled mess that I can barely make sense of. Part of me wants to tell Kenzo I won’t be a pawn in this shit. Or that Takeshi is right, and that Tokyo isn’t worth it.

But another part—a deeper, darker part—knows that this is exactly the kind of burden I’ve been training my entire life to bear as the dutiful, unwavering sister who will do whatever it takes to secure our family’s future.

Kenzo’s gaze softens slightly as he meets my eyes, his expression somber. “Miyamoto owes a debt to our father,” he says quietly. “And he has never forgotten it. Now he wants to repay that debt, but his terms are clear. A lot of those Tokyo families are old-school enough that in their minds, respectability equates to you being ‘spoken for’.”

My chest tightens as Kenzo’s words sink in. To Miyamoto and the other family heads, as un unmarried woman I’m a liability, unworthy of their support.

Fuck. *That*.

Bitter resentment rises in my throat, yet beneath the anger there’s cold understanding, a reluctant acceptance of the truth.

Tokyo *is* worth it. The Mori-kai are at the top of the food chain here in Kyoto, but Tokyo is Rome at the height of the Ancient Roman Empire. We break into *that*, and we become gods.

Kenzo’s tone becomes almost apologetic, as if he can sense the conflict churning within me. “This arrangement with Damian is temporary, Hana. A mere formality. *Obviously*. Once we’ve established our position in Tokyo and secured the alliance with the Katō-kai, the engagement can be broken

off, I *swear* to you. And the reason why Kir and I talked and came to the conclusion that it should be to Damian is because the Nikolayev Bratva will also be seeking a toehold into Tokyo. This gets Damian into the mix there alongside Hana, so both our families can start carving out a piece of it."

Annika turns to level another icy glare at my brother. "You didn't mention *any* of this shit when we talked the other day," she hisses. "Kenzo, what you're asking is—"

"No more than what he'd ask of any of us," I say gently, looking right at her. I shrug with a wry smile. "Look, Anni, I appreciate you going to bat for me. But this isn't sexism. If Miyamoto demanded that *Tak* get married in order to run things in Tokyo, Kenzo would be asking him to do the same."

"And I'd be telling him to go fuck himself," Takeshi mutters darkly.

I ignore my twin and smile wryly at Annika again. "Kenzo's right: it's not *real*."

I have to choose my words carefully around Annika and Freya when it comes to Damian. I mean, *I* certainly think he's a psychopath. They might, too. But he's also basically their brother, and has been for years. Hell, it recently came to light that he literally *is* Freya's cousin.

Mal, who's been pretty silent until now, finally speaks, his voice cool and controlled. "There's a plan in place to deal with the Ishida-kai, but it's going to take time to execute," he says, casting a pointed look at Takeshi. "If it works, the strategy will be effective, but not immediately."

Takeshi bristles, scowling and shooting Mal an irritated look. "I'm working on it," he growls darkly. There's a dangerous fire in his eyes: a look I know well that sends a chill down my spine

I mean, *speaking of* psycho brothers…

I turn to him, unable to keep the question from popping out. "What plan is this?"

Takeshi's jaw tightens, his gaze hardening as he shakes his head. "Not one you need to worry about," he mutters, brushing me off with clipped finality.

Mal smirks, but there's a faint crease in his brow as he glances at Takeshi. "Yeah, well, work on it *faster*," he mutters out of the corner of his mouth. There's an edge to his tone that only heightens my suspicion that whatever they're planning is serious, and probably reckless.

Kenzo clears his throat, the tension in the room shifting and refocusing as he straightens, his expression hardening into steely resolve. "Takeshi's plan is already in motion," he says, his voice carrying a note of finality, "but we can't depend on one single strategy. We need a stable entry into Tokyo, and for that we need Miyamoto's support." He turns to me, a hint of regret in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Hana. But this is how it has to be. For now, this is our only shot into Tokyo."

"And you think Tokyo is worth it," Freya snaps.

I glance at her and grin.

That's my girl.

Even so, after she winks at me, I sigh.

"It is," I say quietly. "Worth it, I mean. Kyoto is one thing. But Tokyo is another level entirely, you know that. We carve out a place there for the Mori-kai, and we become the elite. Completely untouchable."

Kenzo meets my eye and dips his chin.

Thank you, he mouths silently.

I nod back. "Just don't expect me to be happy about it," I add quietly.

My tone is calm, but there's an edge to it, a defiance that I cling to like a lifeline. I may be a pawn in this game, but this pawn won't get captured without a fight.

* * *

THE FIRST SOFT light of dawn filters through my bedroom curtains, casting a muted glow across the room. The quiet stillness should be comforting. This

hour has always been *my* time, a brief reprieve before the day's demands begin.

But this morning, my thoughts are restless, tangled and frayed, haunted by shadows I can't shake.

With a slow exhale, I slip out of bed and begin my routine, the familiar motions grounding me as I silently move through them. I rise at 5 a.m. sharp, just as I have every morning since I can remember. But today the minutes feel heavier, stretching out with an oppressive weight as though time itself is conspiring against me. The polished surfaces of my room reflect my unease, the early morning light shining off the edges of my neatly arranged belongings, everything exactly in its place.

Unlike my life right now…

Ever since the warehouse—ever since *him*—it feels as though that curated order has started to fracture. Part of me feels tainted, like I've invited something dark and uncontrollable into my life, something that has no place in the world I've so carefully constructed.

I force my mind to quiet as I pull on my workout gear: sleek black leggings, a fitted tank, my hair twisted back in a severe bun. In the mirror, I see my reflection staring back, expression impassive and controlled—at least on the surface. I turn away, heading through the mansion's silent hallways toward the private gym.

The house feels empty, my family tucked away, each of them following their own morning routines. Kenzo and Annika are probably just getting up, too. Freya and Mal, meanwhile, have probably just gone to bed, seeing as Mal is now matching Freya's nocturnal-by-necessity schedule, what with her skin condition when it comes to sunlight.

Tak is *also* probably just going to bed now. But that has nothing to do with skin issues and everything to do with the fact that he was most likely out partying or causing havoc and mayhem until an hour ago.

In the gym, I begin my warm-up stretches, movements I know by heart. I shift into high-intensity cardio, my legs pumping, my breath falling into a rhythm, the pounding of my heart syncing with each step.

Normally, this routine clears my mind, centers me, draws out any tension until all that's left is focus. Today, my thoughts refuse to settle. Each movement feels difficult, as though I'm dragging an invisible weight behind me.

The memories rush back unbidden, sharp and clear. *His* eyes, and the predatory gleam in them that sliced through the darkness in the warehouse. His touch, rough and possessive, fingers tracing my lips with a taunting control that somehow captivated me even as it infuriated and terrified me. The memory still sends a shiver down my spine, my body reacting with a tension I can't explain or shake.

I push through my jiu-jitsu drills, throwing punches and blocking invisible opponents, forcing myself through each sequence with drive and determination. But my body betrays me, my muscles stiff and unresponsive, my movements lacking the fluidity I've honed with years of discipline. There's a heaviness in my chest, a frustration I can't release. It's as though he's invaded even this, my inner sanctuary, leaving his mark on the one place I've always felt in control.

Asshole.

I grit my teeth, finishing my practice and moving toward the traditional Japanese garden outside my room. Normally, this is my most sacred time—a few minutes of peace, alone with my thoughts in the gentle morning air. I settle cross-legged on the ground and close my eyes, inhaling the earthy scent of the garden, focusing on the breeze whispering against my skin, the faint rustle of leaves.

Breathe, Hana. Focus.

But again, the moment I try to sink into the quiet his face flickers into my mind, vivid and unrelenting. The memory of him towering over me, his eyes fiery with twisted amusement, his fingers brushing my lips as though he owned them.

His thick cock, swollen and urgent as he fucked my willing mouth. As he wrested control from me. As he spilled his cum over my tongue and down my throat.

I shudder, violently ripped from my meditative state as it all comes rushing back. I scowl, gritting my teeth and trying to sink back into relaxation, but I still feel the ropes digging into my skin, remember the way my pulse quickened, each beat reminding me how powerless I'd been beneath his gaze. I clench my hands, desperate to shake the memory, but still it clings to me, taunting me with its intensity.

And don't get me started on the dream from last night.

I shudder, remembering it in flashes, each one bringing a fresh wave of shame. I was bound again by thick ropes, each loop tightening as though by his own hands. Once again he stood over me, fisting his cock before pushing it past my lips.

But he didn't stop there. In the dream, he was everywhere, taking every part of me—bound, helpless, and utterly under his control as he used me for his pleasure.

…and, shamefully, for *mine,* too.

I replay the dream fragments: being completely at his mercy, every part of me exposed, vulnerable. His fingers tracing over my skin with a rough, possessive touch that left me breathless. Feeling the heat of his breath, the weight of his body pressing down on me, and hearing his low, taunting voice that sent shivers through me.

The worst part—the part I can't seem to shake—is that I'd *wanted* it. In the dream my body responded to him, betraying me with a need I didn't understand or want to admit. I woke up gasping, heart pounding, skin flushed with an unwelcome heat that remained even as I tried to shake off the remnants of the dream.

With a slickness between my thighs I'm not quite ready to analyze yet.

I open my eyes, my meditative state shattered. A frustrated breath escapes me and I press my palms to my face, trying to block out the memories, the sensations.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I've spent my entire life perfecting control—over my mind, my body, my surroundings. And somehow, this man has managed to wreck all of it in a single night.

I rise, my breath shallow as I retreat to my room, needing to wash away this lingering sense of helplessness. I step into my bathroom, stripping off my workout clothes and getting into the shower, letting the hot water pound against my skin. Steam fills the space, clouding the mirror, and I close my eyes, hoping the heat will clear my mind of these intrusive thoughts.

But even here, in the sanctuary of my bathroom, he's with me. I can almost feel his fingers tracing my skin, feel his gaze burning into me, promising things I don't want to think about and *should not want*.

Don't think for a moment that this ends here.

His voice had been low, laced with dark satisfaction that sent a thrill through me despite myself. And the fucked-up thing is, the threat has become a prophesy. Damian was right: it didn't end there.

Not. At. All.

Now, I'm going to be *engaged* to him. Maybe not for real, and maybe I won't be *actually* marrying the psychopath. But I will be bound to him.

Caged in with him, with no escape.

I finish my shower and step out, wrapping a towel around myself. Water drips down my back, the air heavy with steam as I swipe a hand across the glass to clear it. My reflection stares back, flushed cheeks, damp hair clinging to my neck, wide eyes haunted. I look…different. Like something beneath the surface has shifted, splintered.

I take deep breath, exhaling the tension as best I can.

This is happening, self. You have to do this.

And it's true. I do. For my family. For all of it.

I exhale.

Fuck it. What happened, regrettably, happened. But Damian and I are both adults. We did…an adult thing. Yes, it involved me being *tied up*. Yes, it felt like borderline blackmail. And yes, he might be…okay, probably *is*…an actual psychopath.

So what?

We're both doing this for our families. Damian might be crazy, but I know from Freya and Annika that he eats, sleeps and breathes loyalty to Kir and the Nikolayev Bratva. Crazy or not, he won't let what happened last night affect our mutual goal of gaining a foothold in Tokyo.

Right?

With a frustrated sigh, I head back into my bedroom.

The moment I step through the doorway I jump out of my fucking skin, my heart lurching into my throat and forcing out a scream.

Damian sits on the edge of my bed in black jeans and a t-shirt, his posture relaxed, legs spread wide, perfectly at ease invading my private space. Another strangled, shocked sound escapes me as I clutch the towel more tightly around myself.

He looks up, a slow, dark smile curling his lips as his gaze sweeps over me with an intensity that leaves me breathless. In his hand is a mask.

My blood chills.

It's *my fox mask.*

"Hello, Kitsune," he murmurs, his voice filled with a rich, dark amusement that makes my stomach twist. "I think we need to have a nice, long *chat*." He examines the mask thoughtfully, smiling deviously. "Just the two of us, without your family knowing about…well…*any of it*."

My heart drops. My face pales.

Damian's grin widens as he twirls the mask on his finger.

"Wouldn't you agree?"

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5

HANA

I STAND THERE STARING at him in frozen horror. Damian's gaze moves over me with an unsettling calm, like he belongs here and has every right to be sitting on my bed. A dark smile twists his lips as he takes in my half-naked, dripping wet form.

"Get… Get out!" I finally whisper, gripping the towel tighter around me. My voice comes out shakier than I'm used to, my tone a mix of fury and something else I don't want to identify, gnawing at the edges of my control.

Damian rises slowly, his movements lazy, as if he's savoring each reaction, each spark of anger and confusion in my eyes. He begins a slow, deliberate walk around my room, his hand running over my things with unsettling familiarity. He moves to my dresser, brushing his fingers over the neatly lined up framed family photos. Each touch feels invasive, as if he's prying into my private thoughts and inner being.

I clench my fists, wanting to yell again at him to stop. But the words stick in my throat, trapped under the quietly authoritative weight of his presence that fills the room and chokes the air. Every touch, every move he makes is a violation, yet I can't stop him or pull myself from the grip he has over me.

"You can't touch those," I finally blurt, my voice feeling like it's coming through a thick wall.

He turns, meeting my eyes with a dark, knowing gaze. "Can't I?" he murmurs. His tone is taunting, each syllable a quiet challenge, and his

words send a shiver down my spine. “What’s yours is mine, and what’s mine is yours… Isn’t that right, *fiancée*?”

He crosses to me with slow, measured steps, his gaze trailing down my exposed skin, his presence overpowering and inescapable. The clean, bergamot and citrusy smell of him invades my nostrils. I can feel the heat radiating off his body through the thin towel wrapped around me, the tension between us tightening, every breath filling me with both anger and something darker I can’t bear to admit.

I manage to steady myself, my words coming out controlled. “This is a duty we’re both doing for our families. So we’ll…do it. It’s just pretend.” I want to sound firm, but at the end my voice wavers.

Damian’s eyes flash with a dangerous satisfaction. “Oh, you know it’s deeper than that,” he says, his voice a low, seductive murmur that makes my pulse quicken. “And we’ll do *much* more than *just pretend*.”

I swallow hard, fighting the shiver that runs through me. “I can promise you,” I say through gritted teeth, lifting my chin, “we won’t.”

He chuckles darkly, sending a chill down my spine. “Does your mouth miss my dick?”

Heat flares in my cheeks, and my voice is low and fierce. “You *do not* get to speak to me like—”

“Because my dick *really* misses your mouth,” he interrupts, his words taunting and deliberate.

I glare at him with a fury that borders on hatred. “Listen to me carefully, Damian.” I lean closer, my voice icy. “That’s never happening again, ever, in any capacity. That was a *one time* thing. A transaction. I do…*that*, and you…*you know*.”

“Keep your dirty little secret?” he growls quietly, his tone seeped in a dark sensuality.

“*Yes*,” I hiss. “But that’s it. A one-fucking-time thing.”

His gaze doesn’t falter, the faintest of smirks tugging at his lips. “I disagree.”

I shrug, feigning indifference, though every part of me is simmering with fury. “Push it,” I say, each word clipped, “and I’ll tell everyone what you made me do the other night.”

His laugh is instant, quiet, and condescending. He takes a step closer, the distance between us shrinking to almost nothing. “But you *offered*, Kitsune,” he murmurs. “Quite explicitly, if I remember correctly. You all but *begged me* to let you suck my cock.”

My face throbs with heat, my mouth dropping open.

No one, and I mean *no one*, has ever spoken to me like that.

“Isn’t that right, Kitsune?”

I flinch at the nickname, at the way it slips from his lips as if it’s some kind of truth, a secret part of me he has claimed for himself. “Stop calling me that,” I seethe, my voice laced with a desperation I can’t hide.

“But that’s who you are,” he says, the dark intensity in his eyes sending a thrill through me despite myself. “*The Kitsune*.” He tilts his head, studying me with sharp, dangerous amusement. “And if you’re going to lord it over me with threats, I should be allowed to play that game too.”

I tense, a cold weight settling in my stomach as I see the faint gleam of satisfaction in his eyes that tells me he knows he has a dark weapon to use against me.

“You’ve been laundering money for some of the most unhinged, dangerous people on Earth,” he whispers, each word sinking into me like a blade. “Worse, laundering it through your family’s *legitimate* business interests. And from the look on your face, I’m guessing your family doesn't know… do they.” He leans in, his voice dropping even lower. “What would they think if they knew? Would it destroy the perfect image you’ve spent your life building?”

I can feel the blood draining from my face, the very air seeming to thin around me as his words sink in, each one hitting with the force of a blow.

Before I can gather my thoughts, his hand moves, reaching for the towel wrapped around me. I slap his hand away, my breath catching, but he's insistent, his fingers curling around the edge of the towel, looking at me darkly with a mixture of amusement and hunger.

"Stop it," I hiss, my voice laced with a desperation I hate, a weakness that makes my skin crawl.

He doesn't listen. His fingers are firm as he pulls. The towel slips down, falling with a soft whisper to the floor between us. I stand frozen, every inch of me exposed, my defenses shattered under the weight of his gaze.

His eyes roam over me, a slow, possessive sweep that sends heat pooling low in my stomach, a reaction I can't control or stop. I feel a forbidden thrill from the sheer dominance he exudes, the way he's stripped away every shred of control I thought was mine.

"This isn't over," he says, his voice a low growl, his gaze locked on mine with an intensity that leaves me breathless. "Not at all. We're going to play like we did the other night *whenever* I want."

My throat tightens, a faint protest hovering on my lips, but I can't find my voice or pull my thoughts together enough to utter it. All I can feel is the weight of his words, the dark promise in his eyes, the way he stands over me, unrelenting and immovable.

"Tonight," he murmurs, a dark smile curving his lips. "Come to my penthouse."

The words barely register, the shock of his demand stunning me into silence. "*What*?" I blurt.

"You heard me."

My throat bobs thickly. "Why?" I ask, my voice hoarse.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm going to pick up where we left off."

A shiver runs through me but I force myself to hold his gaze, refusing to let him see the fear and vulnerability coiling in my chest. "Meaning?"

He leans in, whispering. "Meaning, I want to see you *all tied up again*."

I balk, the memory of that night flashing through my mind. The ropes…the way he'd looked at me…as though I were his to claim and control. A surge of anger rises in my chest, mingling with panic I can't push down. Before I can respond, his finger presses against my lips, silencing me.

"If that doesn't happen," he murmurs, "I tell your family everything."

My breath catches, my mind blanking as the weight of his threat hangs in the air before the full reality of what he's demanding crashes down.

I stand frozen, my heart racing, my mind reeling with a mixture of rage and something darker simmering just below the surface—a thrill I can neither deny nor extinguish.

Damian steps back, his gaze lingering on me for a final moment before he turns, walking toward the door with that same calm, unbothered stride, as though this is just the beginning of a game he's designed and knows he has already won.

"I'll text you the address," he tosses over his shoulder. "Don't be late, Kitsune. You don't want to keep me waiting."

Then he's gone, leaving me naked, shivering, and reeling.

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6

DAMIAN

THE LIGHTS of Kyoto spread out beyond the windows of the penthouse like glimmering constellations in the night sky.

Usually, I love this view—although I *didn't* love the idea of spending half my time here in Kyoto, beautiful as it is, when my uncle first allied us with the Mori-kai. When Annika, who's like a sister to me, was forced to marry Kenzo to stop a fucking bloodbath between our families, I was all set to end that bloodbath by walking into the Mori house and cutting throats until someone called the whole thing off.

Unfortunately for my innate bloodlust and thirst for violence, that's not how it panned out. But at least my quasi-sister is happy, having found her "soulmate" in Kenzo.

Ugh, "*soulmate*."

Kill me now.

The very concepts of "soulmates" or love at all are such laughably ridiculous fairytales to me that I almost get angry when people bring them up. It's like an adult walking up to you and insisting to your face that Santa Claus is real. All you want to do is beat some sense into them.

At least, all *I* want to do is beat some sense into them. Or at the very least, just beat them. But I digress.

Since forming that alliance with the Mori-kai and spending some time here, I've come to appreciate Japan—Kyoto specifically—more. I bought this penthouse because of all the time I'd be spending here, away from New York. Ultimately, I'd consider the Big Apple my true home, but Kyoto has certainly grown on me.

That said, tonight, my focus is not on the view out these windows of the city below.

I pace, a restlessness prickling beneath my skin. Every muscle feels coiled tight, anticipation humming through me like napalm.

Kyoto is beautiful, but tonight, I barely see it. My mind's elsewhere, filled with an image I can't shake—Hana Mori, bound and helpless, the look in her eyes somewhere between fury and surrender. It consumes my thoughts. It's an obsession I can't control and don't remotely understand.

I've had beautiful women throw themselves at me my entire life, eager for my attention, craving my power and, some of them, the darkness they sense under the surface. But Hana?

The exact opposite.

Her defiance and stubborn refusal to fall in line like everyone else has been on my mind all day. It shouldn't bother me. It shouldn't matter. And yet, a huge part of me can't shake the image from my mind—the way she looked in the warehouse, bound and vulnerable, every bit of her under my control.

Beautiful. Broken. An exquisitely perfect work of erotic art, all tied up like that.

I may not understand love or the ridiculous notion of soulmates, but I *do* understand obsession in its most depraved, twisted incarnation. And that's what Hana has become to me: an *obsession*. A fixation. One I don't truly understand.

It's strange, this feeling she stirs in me. It runs deeper than the usual satisfaction of bending another person to my will. I'm used to that. People are predictable, and I've always been able to manipulate them to fit whatever need or whim strikes me. But Hana appears to be…different.

Maybe I’m just hungry for a challenge.

I find myself reliving that night again and again, every detail etched into my mind with unfading clarity. The way she looked up at me with fear and fury flashing in her eyes. The way her breath hitched, her pulse racing even as she tried to hide it. She swallowed her pride…swallowed *me*…and yet somehow, I’m the one who feels as though I lost that power game. It’s confounding.

My gaze falls to the table, where the ropes and assorted other playthings lie ready and waiting. My fingers trace over the toys, a dark smile forming on my lips as I imagine her here, bound and vulnerable, her defiance slowly crumbling under my control.

The women I usually entertain come to me because they want to be controlled, and crave the power I can offer. They know the game and are more than willing to play by its rules, not to mention sign the necessary NDAs beforehand.

I mean, I’m not just some guy with a rope kink. I’m the heir apparent to the entire Nikolayev Bratva.

But Hana’s different. She doesn’t just resist me—she’s genuinely repulsed by me. I can see it in the way her nose wrinkles in disgust whenever I get too close, the way her voice drips with disdain. She’s not afraid to show her contempt for me. But rather than pushing me away, that defiance only pulls me in and fuels a hunger that’s becoming harder to ignore.

There’s a danger in playing this game with her, of course. Hana Mori isn’t some nameless bimbo from a club. She’s the sister of Kenzo fucking Mori, the same man who could destroy our alliance with a single word, who would have no qualms about personally gutting me like a fish—or at least making what I’m sure would be a *very* good attempt—if he thought I posed a threat to his family.

And then there’s Kir. He’s warned me before, countless times, about treading carefully and keeping my…*deviant* impulses in check. He knows what I’m capable of, knows the darkness I have within me. He’s seen it firsthand and raised me knowing all about it after taking me in after my parents were ripped from me.

I was eight years old when it happened. My parents were driving us through Brooklyn, the streets slippery with rain, the night heavy with fog. I remember the sound first: the screech of tires, the crash of metal. Then the way the world tilted end-over-end, throwing me into a haze of confusion and fear.

I remember feeling the seatbelt cutting into my skin, tasting the blood sharp on my tongue. And then…silence. I remember looking over, seeing my mother's hand hanging limp near me, her eyes staring vacantly, her body crumpled and broken. My father, too, his life extinguished in an instant, leaving me alone.

A baptism in blood.

Later, I came to understand that what happened that night was no accident. That my parents were targets in a game a rival crime family was playing with Kir.

He's the one that came for me that night when I was lying in the hospital bed. He pulled me from the hole I was falling into, his face a mask of anger and grief. He took me in, raised me as his own, and molded me into the man I am today. Kir became more than an uncle; he grew to be my father, my mentor, the only person who truly understands the darkness that consumes me.

That darkness has always been there, bubbling just beneath the surface, a part of me that I've never even tried to tame. It makes me good at what I do, allows me to bend people to my will, to control them without hesitation.

It also, almost certainly, makes me…*different*.

"Neurodivergent."

"Psychotic," if we're being trendy and edgy.

Both fun ways of tiptoeing around the phrase on everyone's tongue: *fucking crazy*.

Still… I can't let this thing with Hana go. I can't shake the desire to see her break, to experience that moment when she finally realizes how little power she has against me. The idea of it sends a thrill through me that gets my

blood hot and my dick rock-hard in a way that I know deep down is as dangerous as it is addictive.

I smirk, anticipation curling within me as I picture her walking through the door, her confidence fading the moment she sees the ropes and implements I've laid out and remembers what's at stake. She might think she's in control, but that's the beauty of this game: she doesn't know just how deep she's in, how very tightly I've woven her into my plans.

A soft knock pulls my attention to the door, and a hungry grin prowls across my lips.

Let's begin, Kitsune…

I open the door lazily and lean against the frame as I watch her stride in, her air of calm confidence highly amusing. She throws not a single glance in my direction, chin held high, stiletto heels clicking deliberately against the marble floor.

The dress she's chosen has my cock swelling with hunger and need. It's sleek, hugging her figure perfectly. She looks nothing like cornered prey. If anything, she appears to be stalking *me*. The thrill her appearance sends through me is unexpected and addictive. It's been so long since I've felt this way, or had a challenge like this. I'd expected her to walk in with a hint of fear, maybe a tremor in her hands, perhaps even a trace of hesitation.

If I was particularly lucky, maybe she'd even beg me to reconsider our dark arrangement—fuck, I'm not sure I'd be able to control myself if she begged—but this boldness, this fire in her eyes is…*unexpected*.

And oh-so-tantalizing.

She stops in the middle of the room, in front of the ropes and cuffs I've laid out on the coffee table, her gaze unwavering when she glances at them. The air thickens with tension as I close the door behind me, savoring the click of the lock that subtly reminds her that she's in my world now. I watch the way she holds herself, so poised, so carefully controlled. It only fuels the hunger building inside me, the twisted satisfaction that she's finally alone with me, exactly where I want her.

She meets my gaze, her expression neutral, her eyes cold. “I know what you’re doing,” she says, her voice low and steady. “At least, what you’re trying to do.”

I smirk, leaning back against the wall and letting my gaze drift over her languidly. “And what would that be?” I ask, my voice soft and taunting, letting her see just how little her bravado affects me.

Her gaze doesn’t waver. “This game you’re playing,” she says, her jaw set, her tone filled with contempt that cuts deeper than I want to admit. “Holding my secrets over my head while you try to…*corrupt* me.”

I let out a low chuckle, the thrill spiking higher, a predator closing in on his prey. “Oh, I think we both know,” I murmur, my voice dropping to a growl as I step closer, “that it wouldn’t take much effort for me to corrupt you, *Kitsune*.”

She presses her lips together, defiance in her eyes as she reaches into her bag, pulls out a folded piece of paper, and holds it out to me. Her fingers are steady and her gaze unflinching, like she’s serving me court papers.

“Well, I’m not playing that game. In fact,” she says, her voice laced with quiet triumph, “I’ve removed all the pieces from the board.”

The smugness in her tone fans the flames of irritation smoldering beneath my calm exterior. I take the paper and unfold it, skimming the text, my smirk fading. It’s an email addressed to her entire family.

Fucking. *Fuck*.

It’s a goddamn confession. A full, detailed account of her money laundering, plus her explanation that it was intended to ease the Mori-kai’s financial strain.

I blink as a re-read it again.

Shit. She’s vaporized every ounce of leverage I held over her.

My jaw clenches as I read it yet again, irritation twisting in my chest.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. She was supposed to be desperate, cornered, begging for my silence. Instead, she’s ripped the rug out from

under me.

The faint, smug curve of her lips only makes it worse.

I lift my gaze to hers, and there's a spark of triumph in her eyes that sends both a dark thrill and bitter frustration coursing through me. She cocks an eyebrow, glancing at the ropes and cuffs on the table, her expression mocking. "So," she drawls, her voice heavy with sarcasm, "play with your toys by yourself. I'm out. Nice try, though."

My fist clenches around the printout, rage brewing under my skin as I crumple it.

"*Yeah*, so, that's just a printout," she says patronizingly, standing there so confident, so supremely sure of herself. "I'm not sure if you know how *emails* work, but destroying that paper doesn't really do *shit*, so…"

She shrugs, that smug look still on her face. It's infuriating and thrilling all at once, a tangled mess of feelings that twist and knot around me, making it hard to breathe, hard to think. I want to trap her and wipe that smug look off her face. I want to crush her defiance, break her down, make her see just how wrong she is to think she can walk out of here unscathed.

I don't move. I hold my ground, forcing myself to stay calm and keep my expression unreadable, even as I feel her slipping from my grasp, her victory hanging in the air. She watches me for a moment longer before she glances again at the ropes and scoffs.

She turns on her heel, her steps measured and confident as she walks right past me, opens the door, and leaves.

Click.

Just like that.

The door shuts, the final sound of her departure echoing through the silence. I'm left alone with nothing but the quiet and the lingering scent of her perfume. I stare at the crumpled paper in my hand, the confession that's torn away my power, the memory of her look of triumph still taunting me.

The silence presses down, each second stretching out, the irritation in my chest curling, twisting, and slowly morphing into something else.

Admiration.

Beneath the frustration, I feel a reluctant, grudging respect brewing for her cunning, her willingness to strip herself bare, to sacrifice everything *just to keep me out of her life*. No one's ever done that before. No one's ever had the unmitigated gall to stand in my path and stare me down with such cool, calculated defiance. It wakens something inside me, a hunger that's more demanding than the usual thrill, a challenge that I can't ignore.

She may think the game is over, that she's won and freed herself from my control.

That's categorically not the case.

All she's done is make herself more interesting. More worth pursuing.

I smile, my irritation shifting and settling into a new resolve, a fresh determination to bring her back under my thumb.

Hana Mori may have stripped away my leverage, but that only makes the game more enticing. Next time, I'll make sure she's cornered—truly cornered—with no escape in sight.

I toss the crumpled paper onto the table, a satisfied, almost dangerous glint in my eyes. She may think she's done with me, but she seems to have overlooked one microscopic, insignificant detail:

She's about to become my fucking fiancée.

You haven't seen anything yet, Kitsune.

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7

HANA

FOR THE FIRST time in what feels like days, I let myself exhale fully, savoring a rare sense of peace as the morning light filters into my bedroom.

It's been four days since Damian's penthouse. I've been tensely anticipating his next move—a message, another sudden, unnerving appearance—anything that would signal he's still playing this insane game. But… nothing. Nada. Just silence, thank God.

He bought it.

That carefully crafted "confession" email I showed him—detailing the Mori-kai's financial strain and my diligent, if misguided, plan to stabilize everything—was, obviously, bullshit.

Like *fuck* am I telling my family I've been secretly working with underworld lunatics and putting all our legitimate business assets in danger by funneling said lunatics' dirty money through them.

Damian sure seemed to buy it, though.

I grin as I think about it, savoring the sweet victory snatched from the jaws of a predator. I outmaneuvered him, stripped him of the power he'd tried to hold over me. Boy, I'll bet the fucker was surprised.

As I stretch my legs and stand by the window I feel lighter, like a weight's been finally lifted. It's surreal, this quiet sense of freedom, the feeling that I

might actually have my life back. I close my eyes, breathing in the calm of the morning.

Yet beneath the surface, there's a strange, nagging sensation. A faint disappointment I can't quite shake. It's absurd. I should be celebrating my victory, not second-guessing it. Damian's absence is a blessing, a chance to return to the order and predictability I've built my life around. So why does part of me feel strangely…unsatisfied?

Enough. I shake my head, dismissing the thought.

My morning routine unfolds with welcome normalcy—work out, mediation, invigorating shower, coffee brewed to perfection, a quiet breakfast alone. By the time I finish getting ready, the sense of control is back, grounding me once more to the precise, structured world I know and command.

Later in the morning, I step through the sleek glass doors of Mori Holdings, the corporate headquarters for my family's legitimate empire. The modern building stands proud in the heart of Kyoto, an unmistakable beacon of the Mori-kai's influence. This office is the respectable, polished face of our family, hiding the underworld dealings that run like hidden roots beneath our empire.

As I step into the elevator, I take a deep, centering breath. The day stretches ahead, a series of meetings, decisions, all of them perfectly planned, perfectly scheduled. The predictability is comforting, a reassurance that I've regained control.

The elevator doors glide open to reveal the top floor, home to Mori Holdings, the office already buzzing with purpose, employees moving with a sense of efficiency. My staff is well aware of my high standards and need for order. It's what keeps Mori Holdings running smoothly and ensures our public face remains untarnished by our darker dealings.

My secretary Emi greets me with her usual efficiency, her voice soft and discreet as she offers a quick rundown of the day's appointments.

"Good morning, Ms. Mori," she murmurs with a small bow. "I've organized the financial reports you requested, and Mr. Nakamura confirmed he'll be

ready for your 10:30 meeting."

"Thank you, Emi," I reply with a brief smile.

I head down the hall toward my private office, a space I designed with painstaking precision. It's an expansive room, the sharp, architectural lines softened by traditional touches—a reminder of our family's heritage and the weight of our legacy. I've decorated with care, each piece selected for its symbolism: delicate scrolls depicting cranes, foxes, and scenes from legends, a nod to the spirit of "The Fox" I've lately decided to embody perhaps a bit too literally. Everything has a place and each item is meticulously arranged, speaking to the control I keep over my life.

As I step into the office, though, something catches my eye—a disruption to the perfect order I maintain.

Something *out of place*.

There, resting in the center of my otherwise immaculate desk, is a small, delicate origami crane. I stop, staring at it, a strange chill finger-walking up my spine.

This isn't mine.

I didn't leave this here.

My desk was, as always, perfectly clear when I left last night, every document filed, every item returned to its place. The crane is a deliberate presence, as if someone has placed it there to disturb the careful balance of my world.

I approach the desk, studying the crane's crisp folds, the sharp lines of its wings and beak. It's almost unnervingly precise, each crease perfect. I pick it up, feeling the strange weightlessness of it in my hand. It's just a folded piece of paper, yet it unsettles me in a way I can't explain.

Frowning, I press the intercom. "Did anyone come into my office yesterday after I left, Emi?" I ask, keeping my tone casual, though a thread of unease weaves through my voice.

Emi's response is immediate and confident. "No, Ms. Mori. No one's been in there since yesterday. I'm sure of it."

I glance down at the crane, the unsettling chill spreading. "Thank you, Emi," I say, clicking off the intercom. I set the crane back down, its delicate form standing out starkly against the clean lines of my desk, a jarring disruption in my otherwise orderly space.

I take a step back, studying it with a strange, inexplicable dread pooling in my stomach.

Let it go.

I force myself to exhale. It's nothing, literally just a piece of origami. For all I know, it's one of the nighttime janitors trying to be sweet or cute. But the problem is, even though I'd love to say I've moved on, I still *very much* have something darkly, dangerously deviant on my mind.

Something named Damian.

Something that found me tied up and at his mercy, and rather than freeing me immediately, *fucked my mouth*.

Came down my throat.

Used me.

Except… I don't feel used. Not in a bad way. And that's…kind of fucked.

Right?

* * *

THE RESTAURANT IS IMMACULATE, all polished wood and sleek, minimalist décor, with soft lighting casting a warm glow over the high-end clientele seated at politely spaced tables.

It offers the perfect backdrop for people like me, people who cultivate an image of controlled elegance. And sitting across from me, also impeccably dressed, also with every strand of hair in place, is Scott.

Scott Hiroyuki—a San Francisco transplant now living here in Kyoto— is, in many ways, the perfect accessory. He's tall, good-looking, and just aloof enough to look mysterious in photographs. As the CFO of a prominent financial firm, he's accomplished, wealthy, and—importantly—understands me and my life.

That is, he understands the "CEO of Mori Holdings" version of me, not the version that races street bikes late at night through the streets of Kyoto with her tattooed Yakuza twin brother, or brokers illicit deals worth billions of Yen with her other brother, an *Oyabun*.

Scott's been my pseudo-boyfriend for nearly a year now, our "partnership" carefully curated, our appearances together flawlessly executed. On paper, he's the perfect fit for a girl-boss like me, and for his part, Scott seems content with our arrangement, too, each of us playing the role we've chosen without complications.

Part of that arrangement, which has worked out *fine* for me, is that we don't sleep together. In fact, I think I can count on the fingers of one hand the times we've kissed on the mouth. No tongue.

It's possible Scott is using me for his image as much as I'm using him for mine. Japanese business culture can be…well, a bit less modern-thinking than in the US. I've even wondered at times if he's gay, or simply asexual, both of which would necessitate a "cover" like me for him to keep up appearances in the Japanese business world.

But even aside from all that, something about Scott has always felt… hollow. Like he's more a reflection of what I think I *should* want, not a person I truly desire. He's polite, almost painfully so, and as he launches into a story about some unfortunate mishap with expense reports at his firm, I can't help but feel for the millionth time that his version of polite is *too* polite.

Soft. Neutered.

I only half-listen as he prattles on, his voice devoid of any passion or excitement.

“And then the accountant accidentally charged the vendor twice,” he sighs, pausing to take a sip of his tea. “It was a mess. I had to spend hours going over the numbers with him.”

I nod, my mind already drifting. I’m not sure if Scott has ever noticed the way my attention slips during these lunches. Probably not. If he has, he’s far too polite to say so because…well, see above.

Just as he gets into yet another detail about the accountant’s error, I cut him off, the words spilling out totally unplanned. “This isn’t working for me anymore, Scott.”

He blinks, pausing mid-sentence, a small frown twisting his lips. “Oh.” He sets down his tea, folding his hands neatly on the table. “I see.”

I take a deep breath, the weight of the decision I’ve *literally just made* settling over me. “I’m going to Tokyo soon for work, and I’ll be there for some time.”

I mean, it’s not a lie.

Scott nods, his expression untroubled. “That makes sense,” he says with a calm acceptance that only underscores how right I am about this. He doesn’t look remotely upset; he’s not even surprised.

A faint smile touches his lips. “Thank you for telling me so directly, Hana,” he says, polite as ever. “You’ve always been straightforward, and I appreciate that.”

For a moment, I feel a twinge of guilt, but it quickly passes. This relationship was never built on anything substantial, and we both know it. Scott offers a small, respectful nod, as though we’re negotiating the end of a business partnership rather than a romantic relationship.

I give him a soft smile midway between gratitude and relief. “Thank you, Scott. For everything.”

He nods once more, taking a measured sip of his tea. “You’re welcome, Hana.” He raises his cup slightly, a gentle toast to what we had—perhaps to what we never truly had at all. “Good luck in Tokyo.”

I raise my own cup in return, inclining my head gracefully. And just like that, it's over—as neat, polite and tidy as the man sitting across from me.

When Scott walks away, I remain at the table a minute longer. I reach into my bag, my fingers tingling as they find the pointed edges of the little origami crane tucked inside.

Maybe I'm not looking for neat, polite and tidy at all.

Maybe I'm looking for chaos and disorder, and sharp, violet eyes.

* * *

As dusk settles over Kyoto, I drive up the winding mountain road back home. Kenzo's men nod when they see me, waving me through the *Torii* gate outside our estate. Lanterns line the stone driveway leading to the main house, bathing the gardens and koi ponds in a soft glow.

The car rolls to a stop and I step out, breathing in the cool evening air. Annika calls to me through the kitchen window. She's bravely trying to cook—well, either chicken or tuna, but it smells like pure soy sauce.

After promising her I'll come back after I change, I make my way to the entrance to my private wing, carefully removing my shoes at the door and changing into slippers. My feet pad softly on the polished floor as I walk, the sound echoing quietly in the silence. Floor-to-ceiling glass walls frame the city below, the lights of Kyoto like distant, scattered stars.

I pause for a moment in the dark, minimalist hallway of glass and muted tones, frowning when I see a window slightly open. A soft evening breeze rustles inside as I walk over and shut it, how it's supposed to be.

How I left it.

Stay the fuck out of my damn wing, Takeshi.

This is one of the reasons I like living here in my own private sanctuary: everything *in* the space is kept in place.

I step into my room—

…and freeze, my pulse jumping as my eyes stab across the room and land on my neatly made bed.

There, sitting in the very middle, is another origami crane.

This one, however, is different. Unlike the one in my office earlier, this crane is *bound*.

Red yarn wraps tightly, almost artistically, around the delicate paper bird, binding its beak downward and its wings back. My breath catches and I step closer, my pulse quickening with each step.

I don’t have to wonder this time if it’s a nice janitor. I know who put this here.

I was wrong.

He’s not fucking done with me *at all*.

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8

HANA

I BARELY RECOGNIZE myself in the mirror.

Not because of being dressed up, or the makeup, or the hair. None of that is new for me. I don't even run a quick errand without making sure I look immaculate, and I doubt anyone has *ever* seen me with a single hair out of place.

I don't need to see a shrink to understand why I'm like that. I *have* seen one—several, actually—after that night back in England near the end of my final year of school. The doctor I liked the most, Dr. Cornell, told me in her straightforward but soft-spoken manner that the reason I was starting to put so much time and effort into my appearance being flawless…clothes, hair, all of it…was to regain a sense of control.

The control that was taken from me that night when that motherfucker had me immobilized.

Naked, while he and his friends laughed.

So, no. It's not my physical appearance that I don't recognize tonight. Yes, my dyed blonde hair is in a fairly elaborate up-do, as opposed to its usual tight, professional ponytail, or simply down. My eye makeup is a little smokier than for a day at the office. The black dress is a bit more elegant than my customary work attire, generally Dior.

But that's not what's different.

It’s the look in my eyes.

The *resignation*.

Defeat.

I glance down at the simple but elegant black dress—Versace: the neckline daring but not overdone, the hem cut at a sharp angle, giving a glimpse of thigh before angling down to the ankle of my foot in Blahnik heels.

The occasion tonight is the “celebration” party for Damian’s and my engagement. It’s a farce and everyone knows it, yet nobody will acknowledge the fact. I’m sure even Miyamoto Katō, a guest of honor tonight, understands that this thing with Damian and I is purely to appease his and the other Tokyo *Oyabun’s* old-world views and get the Mori-kai access to Tokyo. But in the mafia world, especially the Yakuza one, appearances matter more than the truth.

Miyamoto doesn’t care if Damian and I are *actually* a couple. As long as we’re engaged to be married, he won’t be seen as “out of place” by anyone for doing business with me, and we can proceed with his pledge to the Mori-kai.

I run a hand over my hair and study my face in the mirror, the weight of the evening ahead pressing down on me.

A knock at the door pulls me from my thoughts. I glance over my shoulder. “Come in,” I call, curious who’s come to check on me.

A soft smile spreads across my face when Sota unexpectedly appears. He grins widely as he takes me in, his gaze warm and full of quiet pride.

“Beautiful,” he says, his voice carrying a warmth that settles over me like a comforting blanket. His presence has always had that effect—his quiet strength and steadiness somehow make everything a little less overwhelming.

I smile as I turn to face the man who’s been more than a mentor and a guide to me. He’s been like a father, even when I didn’t know I needed one.

Kenzo's, Tak's, and my biological father was Hideo Mori, the once-legendary *Oyabun* of the first iteration of the Mori-kai. Before his rise to the top, when he was still a *waka gashira*—a lieutenant to another Yakuza boss—he met a young Norwegian woman who was studying abroad in Japan: our mother, Astrid Ulstäd.

They ended up having a wild affair and our mom unexpectedly became pregnant. Suddenly, the reality that the man she was with was *very* into the violent world of the Yakuza sank in, and she fled Japan without telling him she was expecting.

Kenzo was born at one of her family's estates in England. Then, a few years later, she decided to try to rekindle things with Hideo. She returned to Japan, and they had another wild affair.

…But once more, Hideo's Yakuza lifestyle was too much for Astrid. She returned to England, *pregnant* again, with Takeshi and me.

Hideo never knew about any of us. Our mother never told him.

Later, our father met and fell in love with the woman he was probably always supposed to find: a Korean-Italian singer named Bella. They had a daughter together, and Hideo decided to retire from the world of the Yakuza.

But tragedy struck as he was trying to extricate himself. A rival attacked him, killing Bella in the process. Hideo and his young daughter, Fumi, escaped to the US with new last names, still not knowing about us, and us still not knowing about him.

These days, we're no longer mysteries to each other. Takeshi isn't into it so much, but Kenzo and I have started forging relationships with our father and our half-sister. She's a hot-shot lawyer in New York now, as well as the state Governor's wife.

But while I care for the man who gave me half my DNA, it's Sota who I really think of as a father. Sota took Kenzo in when my brother first came to Kyoto to discover his Japanese side. He took Takeshi and me in after Mom died, too, as well as our cousin Mal. Sota had been our father's best friend before his disappearance, and even he thought Hideo was dead.

Long story short, Sota Akiyama isn't just a trusted friend of my father. He's family to me in every sense of the word, and always will be.

"Thank you," I mumble.

He tilts his head, studying me keenly, and sighs quietly. "I know all this is a lot to ask of you," he says gently.

I shrug, looking away, unable to fully hide my irritation. "It's *ridiculous*, is what it is. All for the sake of appearances."

He nods, his gaze softening. "Yes, but you know how important appearances are in our world. You know what it means to be Mori-kai. The Yakuza is in your blood, Hana," he adds, sighing deeply. "An affliction I'm afraid you were born with."

I smile wryly as I meet his eyes in the mirror. Sota smiles warmly as he stands behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders. My eyes drop to the stub of the missing pinky on his left hand: a scar that speaks to a dark moment in his past when as a young man he accidentally disrespected his *Oyabun*.

The penalty was being ordered to commit *yubitsume*—aka, cut off *his own pinky* as proof of loyalty, humility, and commitment.

He rarely speaks of it, but the missing finger has always been a reminder to me of the sacrifices he's made to the Yakuza.

So… I mean… If Sota can cut off his own finger to prove his loyalty, I can wear a ring and fake a smile, even if my fake fiancé is Damian the fucking psychopath, who sees the darkest part of me and holds my sins over my head with a smug grin on his face.

Right?

"Just the same," Sota sighs, a wry smile on his face as if reading my thoughts, "I *am* sorry, Hana. This is nothing I ever wanted for you."

"It's just pretend," I say with practiced smoothness, more for me than for him. "And it's not permanent. As soon as we gain our foothold in Tokyo, we can be done with it." I shrug. "It's a small price to pay for family."

Sota smiles quietly, as if he wants to say more, but realizes now isn't the time. Instead, he reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a small velvet box.

"This belonged to my Keiko."

That's another part of Sota's past he doesn't talk about much: his wife, who tragically died of Ovarian cancer after only a year of marriage.

Sota flips the lid open, and my breath catches as the light hits the gorgeous diamond necklace within.

"Here," he says, his voice quieter. "I've always told you: she'd have loved you."

"No, Sota, it's—"

"Please," he says softly. He gives me a reassuring smile, his eyes warm. "She'd want you to wear it tonight," he says, his tone so certain and filled with quiet pride that I can't refuse.

I nod, bowing my head slightly as he gently clasps the necklace around my neck. After he steps back I lift a hand to the necklace, feeling the delicate weight of it that somehow feels like a shield, a piece of his strength and family pride that he's sharing with me.

He gives me a final look that says more than words could. "Fake or not, she'd be proud of the woman you've become," he says, his voice thick with emotion that he rarely shows. "Same as I am."

A lump forms in my throat but I push it down, determined to stay composed. Still, I stand and turn to embrace him. "Thank you, Sota. I…" I let the words trail off as I pull back, knowing he understands.

He inclines his head, offering a faint smile. "It's what family does."

Taking a deep breath, I square my shoulders, glancing at my reflection once more. With the necklace around my neck, I feel different. Stronger. Tonight might be all an illusion, but I can endure it. If Sota can give up so much in the name of loyalty and family, then I can handle this.

I turn back to him, letting my shoulders relax a bit. “It’s just pretending to be married to that lunatic, right?” I shrug. “I mean, anyone could do that.”

Sota grins. “Well, count *me* out. But you?” He winks at me. “You’re my Kitsune.”

I start, my eyes snapping to his as my heart lurches into my throat.

“*Wh-what?*” I choke.

Sota just smiles. “Kitsune,” he chuckles. “The fox spirit. Smart and cunning, just like you.”

He steps back, his gaze lingering on me for a moment.

“Would you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you into the party?”

I swallow, a wry smile on my lips. “The honor would be all mine, Akiyama-san.”

* * *

THE PARTY IS in full swing by the time we get downstairs. It spreads throughout the first floor of our house and spills out into the gardens, elegant party-goers sipping drinks, laughing, and mingling.

I feel myself grinning at the first warm, mellow notes of John Coltrane’s “My Little Brown Book” coming from a *very* good jazz band in a corner of the living room. I turn to Sota just as he pulls away from me, catching a sly grin on his face as he winks and drifts away to talk to some old Yakuza pals.

Oh, Sota. This was totally his doing. He knows how much I love jazz and how much I hate this whole arrangement. So he’s brought in some serious talent for the evening to try to take my mind off all this.

It might actually work.

I snag a glass of champagne from a passing tray and turn to enjoy the band, which is absolutely killing it.

I take in the party as I listen to the music and sip my bubbly. The Mori and Nikolayev families have spared no expense in creating a lavish celebration, even if it's a farce and a formality. The soft glow of chandeliers casts an intimate light over the well-dressed crowd of faces, some familiar, others unknown to me.

Annika appears at my side, giving me a quick hug and complimenting the necklace from Sota. Just as she's asking me about the music, I spot a familiar figure entering the party.

Miyamoto Katō.

Shit.

Annika catches the look on my face and wrinkles her nose. "Duty calls, I presume?"

I groan. "If by that you mean smiling like a good little old-fashioned obedient *woman* for Mr. Old-Fashioned who's responsible for this entire fucking debacle involving me getting engaged to that fucking *psycho*—"

I make a face as I glance back at her.

"Sorry," I wince. "That came out—"

"I mean, you're not wrong."

We both turn as Freya inserts herself into the conversation, dressed, predictably, in all-black with her usual gothy black spiked choker and huge black vinyl platform boots.

"Like, Damian's batshit crazy."

Annika snorts, rolling her eyes. "Frey!"

"What?" Freya giggles. "I can say that. He's my cousin, for fuck's sake. And c'mon, like you don't think it too. I love the guy, but jeez…" She turns to give me a sympathetic look. "Really don't envy you."

"Super encouraging, Frey, thanks," I mutter.

She laughs and hugs me. "Sorry, I'll shut up now. Also, you've got a fan staring holes in the back of your head."

I turn to see Miyamoto smiling at me from across the room. He raises his glass to me when I catch his eye.

"*Ugh*, okay," I spit, glancing back at my friends. "Duty calls. Wish me luck."

I take a deep breath and make my way across the room to Miyamoto, trying to tamp down my disdain for him. He's an older gentleman with a wide smile and a round, jovial face, wearing a suit that's slightly out of date. I have to admit, much as I hate to: it suits him perfectly.

"Ahh, Miss Mori," he says warmly with a respectful bow. His smile is genuine, his eyes soft and his demeanor is warm, almost grandfatherly, yet I know better than to underestimate him. He's not just some "lesser" Yakuza *Oyabun* whose empire is on the decline and needs an ally. He's our ticket into Tokyo.

I bow back, though my own smile feels tight. "Good evening, Katō-san," I reply, my tone clipped and carefully controlled. I don't even try to hide my coolness.

His eyes crinkle as if he's amused rather than offended, and he gives a slight shake of his head. "Miss Mori—"

"Hana is fine."

He dips his chin. "Hana, then. But only if I may insist on Miyamoto instead of this stuffy *Katō-san* business," he grins. "If I may?"

I nod, and he smiles at me again.

"There's no need for the cold shoulder. I know perfectly well you're not fond of this arrangement."

I'm caught off-guard by his frankness. It's rare to hear anyone in our world speak so plainly. I open my mouth to respond, but he holds up a hand.

"Let me be clear, my dear. This isn't about what *I* want," he continues gently, his tone almost paternal. "Tokyo itself is…old-fashioned. The men there, the alliances—they're bound by tradition. If it were up to me alone, I would have no issue doing business with a woman as impressive as

yourself, married or not." He sighs. "But appearances are everything. It's the rest of the world that demands this illusion, not me."

I feel a faint flicker of understanding and nod, some of the tension easing in my chest, though I'm not quite ready to let go of my resentment yet. It's a cold truth—Tokyo doesn't care how capable I am, only that I fit into the image of a Yakuza family.

He glances toward the band, an appreciative smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Ahh, 'Lazy Bird'," he murmurs, nodding along to the Coltrane tune. "Though I have to say, as much as I love this, there's a Stan Getz live version from Rome in, I believe, '66 that simply shines."

I blink in stunned surprise at Miyamoto's jazz knowledge. "I…*yeah*," I blurt, my brows knitting in shock. "Though it's from '65, if we're talking about the same concert."

"My mistake," he chuckles. "Yes, 1965, in Rome. Superb recording, isn't it?"

Well, *this* is unexpected.

Twenty minutes later, my entire opinion of Miyamoto Katō has changed. Not only is he not the misogynistic dick I thought he was, he also might be as much *if not more* of a jazz nerd than I am. I tell him about my favorite jazz club here in Kyoto—the Golden Monkey—which he of course already knows, but says sadly that he hasn't been to in twenty years.

We promise to talk Tokyo and merger business soon, since we've just spent half an hour gabbing about music. Then he's pulled away by some other Yakuza types, and Kenzo is up my ass making sure I do the full rounds of the guests.

My mood improved, I make my way around the party, exchanging polite nods and smiles, acknowledging the Yakuza allies in attendance. Kir and a few of his Bratva associates stand to one side, watching the room with quiet, powerful intensity.

I haven't seen a single glimpse of Damian all night. Honestly, this might be a big reason my mood is so light.

I take a sip of champagne, letting the bubbles tickle my throat, my mind drifting to the future and the Mori-Kai's plans for Tokyo—

"Miss me?" The voice comes from just behind me, low and taunting, ripping me violently from my thoughts.

I stiffen before I turn to level a look at Damian, his gaze burning into me with that familiar, infuriating confidence. I force myself to face him, lifting my chin, meeting his smug expression with a glare.

"Were you in my room?" I demand coldly.

He raises an eyebrow, a slow smirk spreading across his face. "Hmm?"

"My *room*," I snap, remembering the perfectly folded origami crane bound in red yarn. "Were you in it?"

A dark smile plays across this lips. "Is that an invitation?"

My cheeks flush and I clench my teeth. "It is *not*. And whatever fixation you have on me…you can drop it."

He steps closer, his breath warm on my cheek as he leans in, a mocking gleam in his eyes.

"You're too close." I mutter quietly, trying to sound firm, though my pulse quickens as he moves a little bit nearer.

"You're my fiancée," he growls back. "It would be odd if I kept my distance."

I glare at him. "Everyone here knows this is bullshit. Even Miyamoto."

"Everyone knows professional wrestling is bullshit, too, but they still watch it."

He suddenly brings a hand up to cup my jaw. I shiver as he lifts my face, pulling my gaze to his spooky yet gorgeous violet eyes. His lips pull into a smirk, as if he knows exactly what he's doing to me. "You know, there's a guest bathroom just down the hall—"

"Yeah, I *live here*, genius," I say curtly. "I know."

Damian’s eyes flicker with something dark and deadly.

“If we really wanted to sell this, I think me pulling you into that guest bathroom and loudly *fucking you* against the door would really cross all the Ts and dot all the Is, don’t you?”

My face erupts with heat. My core tightens and my teeth sink into my bottom lip. Then I steel myself and narrow my eyes at his.

“Damian?”

He grins wolfishly. “Yes?”

“Fuck off and choke on a bag of dicks.”

“*Such* a dirty mouth,” he murmurs with a dark chuckle that sends a ripple of something unwelcome teasing up my spine. My pulse spikes as he leans close again. His hand is still cupping my jaw, and my core tightens even more when his other hand lands on my hip. “Such a *willing* one, too,” he adds.

My skin tingles with heat as my eyes widen.

“*Stop it*,” I hiss, glancing around to make sure nobody heard.

“I’m just stating the facts.”

“You can keep them to yourself!” I blurt.

I try to back away from him. But his hands don’t budge, an effortless strength in his fingertips as they completely keep me from moving.

“So,” he purrs. “You got my gifts.”

“I don’t want your cranes,” I spit, turning my face away, trying to ignore the way his nearness sends a shiver down my spine and his touch makes my legs shake and my core tighten. The way he’s both a presence and a shadow that refuses to disappear.

“So, something more substantial next time, then.”

My pulse quickens as I try a little harder to pull away from him.

“*Stop it*,” I hiss.

“Stop what?” he responds easily, his tone infuriatingly casual.

I grit my teeth, hoping he finally gets the hint. “You know damn well what. Talking to me crudely, trying to get under my skin. I know you’re just trying to fuck with me, and I would like you to *stop*.”

The corners of his lips curl dangerously and his eyes glint. “Oh, *Kitsune*,” he whispers darkly. “Believe me, you’d know if I was fucking you.”

My face heats. “I said fucking *with*—”

“Potayto, po-tah-to,” he grunts, making my breath hitch. “Besides, Kitsune, I’m not sure you have enough *rope* in this house right now for me to fuck you properly. Do you?”

My face turns scarlet, my pulse skipping, my mind spinning, my heart pounding against my ribs. With a sudden burst of strength, I yank away from him, actually breaking free of his grip as I take three stumbling steps from him.

Damian doesn’t make a move to snatch me back. He just casually watches me back away.

“Going somewhere, Kitsune?”

“Leave me the fuck alone,” I hiss, starting to turn away from him.

“I don’t think we should start this engagement on a foundation of lies, do you?”

I stiffen, icy fingers walking down my spine before I force myself to turn slowly and look at him.

“Meaning?”

His violet eyes flash as he shoves a hand through his silver hair.

“*Meaning* I could lie and tell you I’ll leave you alone. But we both know that isn’t happening.”

He suddenly closes the distance between us and his mouth dips to my ear, his lips barely brushing the lobe and sending a heated throb flickering traitorously through my core.

"*You're mine now, Kitsune. I'd get used to that if I were you.*"

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9

DAMIAN

One of the things I enjoy about Hana is that I can't ever quite tell if I've scandalized her, turned her the fuck on, or both.

I'd like to think it's both.

That's precisely the question I have after I whisper "You're mine now, Kitsune" into her ear. Her cheeks flush, her eyes widen, and her mouth with those oh-so-fuckable lips makes an O-shape.

Her body stiffens, and when she pulls sharply away, there it is: the look that might either be disgusted shock *or* that of a woman whose panties have just grown much, much wetter.

That's where my head's at after she whirls and marches indignantly away. The party continues, but my thoughts are firmly elsewhere.

Busily contemplating the dampness level of Hana Mori's panties.

They're not *solely* focused on that. I mean, seventy percent, easy. The balance is focused on the rest of the woman whose sharp tongue and defiance have left an irritating mark.

Plain and simple, Hana Mori is an uptight, stubborn witch. Yet I can't shake the images of her from that night: bound, vulnerable, with fire in her eyes.

Her mouth *so* willingly wrapping around my dick with a soft little moan.

She’s both a challenge and a frustration, and no matter how much I should dismiss her as a nuisance, she’s gotten under my skin. And she infuriatingly seems to be firmly staying there. Which is a problem.

Two men approach with scowls on their faces, and I glare at them as they make the world’s shittiest attempt at “bumping into me”, like we’re a bunch of fucking Cold War spies.

“Mr. Nikolayev,” Hinata Turo grunts under his breath. “You’ve been avoiding our calls.”

It’s not a lie. I *have* been avoiding his calls. Mostly because I don’t give a shit about him or his organization, and I’m not even the littlest bit intimidated by him. But also, I’ve had other things on my mind lately.

Like how Hana’s tongue felt against the underside of my cock as I emptied my balls down her throat.

But I digress.

Hinata—I have no idea who his little friend is—is a high-ranking *waka gashira* for the Shoichi-kai Yakuza, a mid-level Kyoto organization that mostly just picks up the scraps that the Mori-kai leave them.

But what can I say, I’m a businessman. When my uncle allied us with the Mori-kai, and I started coming to Kyoto more often, it became clear that there was opportunity here. Money laundering is a small side hustle I run in New York. Here in Japan, though, the demand was much, much higher.

Or it *was*, until she started fucking undercutting me as The Kitsune.

Hinata and his boss, though, are customers that stuck with me instead of jumping ship to The Kitsune—whether out of some sort of loyalty, or maybe an anti-woman thing against The Kitsune, or just plain laziness, I don’t know.

But I *do* know what he wants to talk to me about tonight. Because while I’ve not been bothering to respond to his ridiculous number of text messages, I’ve read at least some of them. So I know that the Shoichi-kai are…less than pleased with the returns on their washed, dried, and neatly folded money recently.

“We very much would like to speak with you—”

“Not here,” I mutter through clenched teeth. “Outside.”

The gardens are dimly lit and much quieter, a welcome change from the crowds and all the jazz inside.

Hinata doesn’t waste any time.

“Mr. Nikolayev, we’re not impressed,” he growls. “Maybe you’re the top player in New York. But here in Kyoto, we expect better returns. We’re considering a new partner.” He glances at his buddy, then looks at me with a smug grin. “Perhaps you’ve heard of The Kitsune.”

I clench my fists, holding back my irritation. Their words cut deeper than I choose to admit.

“You know she’s a woman, yes?”

Hinata shrugs.

“And your *Oyabun* is still the same wildly misogynistic fuck that he always was?”

The guy with Hinata swears viciously in Japanese and lunges for me, but Hinata holds him back.

“Money talks, Mr. Nikolayev,” Hinata mutters. “And The Kitsune can offer better returns, faster.”

My gaze slices into him. “What if I were to tell you that The Kitsune is better at choking on my fucking cock than she is at getting you fast returns?”

Hinata smiles coldly. “Who’s the misogynistic fuck now, Mr. Nikolayev?”

My jaw grinds.

“Our next exchange will be your final test. If you can match her results, we’ll stay with you. If not…” He shrugs eloquently.

“You’re making a big mistake,” I warn tersely.

Hinata shrugs again. “Enjoy your party, Mr. Nikolayev.” He smirks. “And… Congratulations on your engagement.”

I stay where I am after they slink off, grinding my teeth so hard I can hear it. Then I hear something else—a quiet, infuriatingly self-satisfied chuckle. I turn, and there she fucking is, her lips curled gleefully.

“Rough night?” Hana asks, her voice dripping with mock sympathy.

“Enjoying yourself?” I reply, sarcasm lacing my voice and my voice raised an octave, mimicking hers. She just smirks, clearly relishing the moment.

“You know,” she drawls, her tone unhurried and maddeningly superior, “if you knew half as much about laundering as you think you do, you wouldn’t be getting complaints.” She tilts her head, watching me with icy confidence. “Want a few pro tips? I’m always happy to help the little guy.”

I level a murderous glare at her.

“Let me guess,” she sighs. “You’re trying to push cash through imports and exports, because you think you can hide more money that way.”

I roll my eyes. “You *can* hide more—”

“Except you’re getting fucked on Japanese import tariffs. Which you’d have been able to plan for if you had any idea what you were doing and weren’t just some superior, trust-fund brat, wannabe Bratva *thug*.”

She gasps as I reach out and grab her arm. I can feel her pulse humming under her skin as I yank her closer, and I hear her breath hitch.

“The problem, *Kitsune*,” I growl, “is that when you talk to me like that…” I lean in, letting my lips brush against her ear. “It makes me want to tie you up and do *very* bad things to you.”

She gasps sharply as I yank her over to the edge of the garden terrace, but I see the spark of excitement she tries to hide.

Her breath catches again as I pin her hard against the corner of the railing with the view of Kyoto far below.

Hana glares up at me, defiance flickering like fire in her eyes even as I see something else warring there behind them. She's pissed off, but there's a thrill beneath her anger as I lean close, refusing to back down, let her go, or give her an inch.

"Let me go," she chokes, a nervous waver in her voice.

I just smile maniacally as I lean down close, my eyes locking on hers.

"*No,*" I growl quietly.

I grip her tighter, pinning her even harder against the corner of the railing. Her pulse jumps again in a *far* too thrilling way that instantly makes my dick twitch.

"You *like* when I take your control away," I murmur, watching as her face flushes. "You *like* to be tied up."

"No."

Her response actually takes me by surprise. It's not just the word, it's the way she says it—with brutal authority and unflinching resolve. It's not a flirtatious "no". It's not coy. That was a solid fucking answer.

"*No,*" she says again, her tone raw, almost vulnerable, giving me a momentary glimpse of something unguarded. "I don't."

She means it, I can tell. The truth of it is etched in her voice, clear and sharp. But something doesn't quite add up. I remember *vividly* the way she all but moaned when I had her under my control in that warehouse that first night, all tied up.

This side of her, this honesty, puzzles me.

I pull back slightly, watching her, wondering what it is about being tied up or pinned that's gotten under her skin.

"Let me the hell go—"

"Take off your panties."

She scoffs, her expression indignant. "Excuse me?"

“*Now*,” I growl.

Hana’s throat bobs. “Fuck you. That’s not happening.”

I smile. “I could always go tell—”

“I already told you,” she sneers, “I took that pawn off the board.”

“Oh, it’s chess we’re playing, then?” I taunt, grinning darkly.

She squints at me, her tone cold. “I’m not playing *anything* with you.”

“No, you don’t like to play at all,” I muse. “That’s why you’re in charge of the legitimate financial aspects of your family’s business. Why, even when you dabble in the exciting world of *money laundering*…” I snicker mockingly. “You wear a mask. Because you’re in this family, but on the outside. Your father ran things. Now Kenzo does. Your psycho brother Tak is a mad dog, and your cousin…well, he’s another mad dog too, isn’t he?” I smile darkly at her. “And that leaves you, hiding behind your color-coded spreadsheets.”

She glares at me, her tone icy. “I know what you’re doing, you know. You’re trying to bait me,” she replies, her chin lifting.

“This reeks of deflection,” I murmur, my gaze fixed on her as I let my hand drift to the hem of her dress. “Take them off.”

She stands her ground, her voice defiant. “Your manipulation tactics are *not* going to work on me,” she snaps, fire sparking in her eyes.

“Good to know. Thanks for saving me the time.”

In a flash I yank her dress up, reach under it, and slip my fingers into the waist of her lacy panties. She gasps sharply, too stunned even to react as I strip her underwear off, her skin warm under my fingers.

“Are you fucking—*Damian*!” she squeals as I shove them down her legs, dropping to my haunches and tugging them off first one foot and then the other before standing in front of her again, caging her against the railing. She stiffens but doesn’t pull away, her gaze locked on mine.

Without breaking eye contact, I grab her hands and shove them behind her back. I loop the delicate lace around her wrists, binding them to the railing.

Her breath comes faster as I lift her dress, my hands tracing the curve of her hips, my fingers exploring her skin, firm yet teasing. I drink in her vulnerability, the unsteady breaths that escape her, the way she struggles to keep her composure even now.

"*Damian…*"

"You could tell me to stop," I growl, my fingers delicately tracing the line of her hip down between her thighs, already feeling heat.

Want.

Wetness.

"*Would you?*" she chokes.

Hana yelps loudly as I lean down and bite the lobe of her ear sharply, causing her body to arch and writhe against me.

"*Probably not.*"

A shaky breath tumbles from her lips as my hand slides between her legs. I groan, my dick throbbing and rock-hard when my fingertips roll over the slick, messy wetness of her pussy.

Christ, she's soaked.

Not turned on. Not wet.

Drenched.

"My my," I growl, cupping her pussy with my hand. Hana shakes and trembles against me, her breath coming fast and ragged. "What have we found here?"

"*Please*," she breathes.

"Please *what*?" I murmur. "Be specific."

Hana whimpers, shaking against me as I drag a thick finger through her lips, parting them. I let the pad of my finger roll over her throbbing clit, and her entire body trembles and spasms.

"*Please don't…*" she chokes.

My lips curl dangerously. "Again, specifics, *Kitsune*. Don't what? Stop? It's all right, I don't plan to. But the begging *is* a nice touch…"

I plunge my finger into her. Hana moans deeply, her body writhing against me. Her arms tense, her muscles straining against the panties bound tight around her wrists. My finger curls in and out, stroking against her g-spot as I grind my palm against her clit.

"*Damian*…" she whimpers.

"Use your words…" I purr, grinning darkly. I add a second finger, and she moans as her back arches, her tits pushing delectably against my chest.

"*You can't…*"

"Can't *what*," I growl. "Make this messy little cunt come all over my fingers? And if that's a challenge, what are we wagering?"

She opens her mouth, but no words come out, only unintelligible animal noises. She's shaking against me, her legs quivering against my thighs, her pussy squeezing tight around my fingers as she coats them with her slick need.

"No answer?" I murmur. "Well, allow me to suggest one, then. When I make you come on my fingers, Kitsune—and that's *when*, not *if*—you'll swallow my cock again, and then you'll take my cum anywhere I say."

My fingers ram into her, drawing a haggard moan from her lips.

"Maybe I'll spray it all over your tits," I murmur thoughtfully.

I curl my fingers into her again, lewd, wet squelching sounds echoing in the darkness around us.

"Or all over your ass. Maybe I'll make a mess of this pretty pussy and watch my cum drip down your lips."

I start to plunge into her faster, my fingers curling against her g-spot again as my palm grinds on her throbbing, swollen clit. Hana bites down hard on her lip, whining and moaning as she bucks against me.

Christ. She keeps grinding against my erection like that, and it's the inside of my pants that'll be getting my cum.

"Or…" I growl, my lips dragging up her neck. I bite down, making her cry out as my teeth rake over her skin. "What if I paint your pretty face with my cum, and then leave it there while I fuck you like a good little cock slut."

It's so obvious when she comes that I'm sure you'd see it from the International Space Station. Hana bites down on her lip as she screams into my shoulder. Her entire body spasms, and her pussy clenches like a velvety wet vice around my fingers as the orgasm surges through her.

I keep her pinned against the railing as her body shudders and shakes. I stroke my fingers in and out, watching her squirm and writhe until it looks like she's going to have a stroke.

It's only then that I slowly drag my fingers out. My hand slips from under her dress, and I lift it in front of my face. Hana stares at my glistening fingers wide-eyed as I bring them to my mouth and wrap my lips around them.

And *suck*.

Her face goes crimson as she watches me slowly lick my fingers clean.

"What the fuck is going on out here?"

We both freeze at the voice behind me. Not just any voice, either.

Goddammit. It's her fucking brother, Takeshi.

A split second later Hana jolts, as if the reality of the situation has just hit her. She tugs frantically at her bound wrists. I curse quietly, reluctantly reaching around and yanking the lace panties off her wrists.

"*I'm keeping these*," I murmur into her ear as I stuff them into my jacket pocket.

She glares, her expression venomous. But then she takes a steadying breath before pushing me away from her. She clears her throat as she smiles innocently at her brother.

“All good, Tak,” she says, her voice steady, a mask of composure slipping over her face. “Just talking business.”

I smile lazily at Takeshi as I turn to him, letting my gaze drift between the two of them. “Your sister was just walking me through a…*messy* situation.”

She bristles beside me.

“Yes, thanks for clarifying all that, Damian.” She turns to me, her look pure poison. “Great strategy for Tokyo.” She clears her throat as she turns to her brother. “I’m going to grab another drink and listen to some more jazz. Coming?”

“Be right in,” Takeshi says, his gaze never leaving me.

When she’s out of sight, Takeshi drops all pretense. He marches over to me, shoving me hard against the railing before getting right in my face.

“Let me explain something to you, fucker,” he snarls, his voice filled with a quiet menace. “You’re a tourist in Crazy-town. I’ve lived there my whole life. I know the bars that stay open late just for the locals. The coffee shop remembers my order, and the burger joint makes mine just the way I like it with extra caramelized onions every single time.”

I sigh, rolling my eyes. “Is there a point to this?”

“The point, shithead,” he snarls, “is that you have no idea what I’m capable of. Your little scary-boy routine doesn’t frighten me. And if you hurt, touch, look at, or even *think* about my sister?” He leans in, his voice dropping to a whisper. “I’ll flay you alive. Literally. Understood?”

I meet his glare with a smirk, letting my silence speak volumes. I’m not intimidated—not by him, not by anyone—but I recognize the threat in his words, the raw protectiveness that runs through this family.

“Understood,” I reply steadily. He releases his grip, his expression still hard, then gives me a final, withering look before turning and disappearing

back into the party, leaving me alone in the garden, the faint echo of Hana's breathless gasps hanging in the cool night air.

I can still fucking taste her on my tongue.

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10

HANA

I'VE BEEN AVOIDING Damian for days now—ignoring his texts, dodging any situation where I might cross paths with him and he might look me in the eye with *the look* that says "I know".

I know that you came on my fingers the other night, your hands tied behind your back with your own panties.

Every time his contact name flashes on my phone, I get a sense of dread mixed with something darker and more unsettling.

I detest him, and yet somehow he's always there, lurking, as if he's branded himself into my psyche. It's confusing, maddening, and no matter how many times I tell myself he's nothing but a bully or a bored psychopath, I can't erase the memory of his hands on me or forget the way he looked at me, as if he could see straight into my soul.

I push the thoughts away as I make my way to the garage, where Takeshi is working on one of his "ladies"—today it's an older Honda NSR500—black, with neon-blue racing stripes down the side.

The estate's garage—and the apartment over it—is his domain. When I enter, I'm hit with the familiar scent of motor oil and metal. Rows of custom bikes fill the space, with a door leading into a larger warehouse-type space filled with classic cars, all lovingly cared for and polished to a mirror finish.

Takeshi is crouched beside the Honda, lost in his work. But he notices when I walk in.

“Yo,” he grunts without looking up. There’s a warmth in his tone that makes me smile. As my twin, he’s always been my closest confidant and knows me better than anyone, and I feel a pang of guilt now for keeping Damian’s intrusion into my life from him.

I linger by the doorway, crossing my arms. “What’s up?”

He glances up, wiping his hands on a rag. “I should be asking you that. You’ve been…” He shrugs. “Off.”

I grin as I shrug. “Just a lot going on with work.”

“Uh-huh,” he replies, eyeing me dubiously. “You do know I can tell when you’re bullshitting me, right?”

I can’t meet his gaze. Takeshi has always been my protector, and if I told him about Damian, he’d handle it, no questions asked. But he’d “handle it” in a way that most places would classify as “murder”.

I force a smile, waving Tak off. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

He watches me for a moment, clearly unconvinced, but then lets it go, turning back to his work with a shake of his head. A knot of anxiety tightens in my stomach. Takeshi would fix everything if I asked him to. So why don’t I?

Because you want Damian to keep lurking in the shadows, a small, unwelcome voice whispers, the restlessness inside me growing.

“Is that psycho bothering you?”

My gaze snaps up to find Tak looking at me intently. “What?”

“You heard me.” He frowns. “Hana, don’t let him freak you out. He’s a weirdo, and it’s obvious his ‘thing’ is throwing people off. I don’t like this situation Kenzo’s put you in. And if the asshole is bothering you—”

“He’s not.”

It pops out too quickly. Luckily, Tak doesn’t seem to notice.

“Well, if he does…”

I smile. “I’ll be sure to let you know.”

Tak grimaces as he turns to nod his chin at the *katana* hanging on the wall. “Please do.”

The garage goes quiet for a second.

“Tak…” I shake my head. “You know I love when you play overprotective brother. But…”

I don’t have to make the request out loud. Takeshi knows I don’t want him killing for me.

Not again.

* * *

TAK and I end up going for a ride around the mountain roads outside Kyoto for a while to get some air. But later, my head still spinning, I head to one of my favorite spots on Earth to try to reset my brain.

The Golden Monkey, probably the coolest jazz bar in the world, is a hidden gem nestled among the back streets of Kyoto, with a sign that glows dimly against the darkened alleyway. It’s an intimate place, timeless, with an air of old-world mystery.

The place has been around *forever*: some of the greats played here back in the proverbial day between gigs at the bigger spots in Tokyo or Osaka. The owner, Daichi, is the second generation of his family to run the place. He’s pushing eighty himself, and his dad was in charge before him.

I’ve been coming here for years, drawn to its smoky atmosphere, its low lighting, and the music—jazz that flows like silk, filling the room with a sound that’s both soothing and alive. Tonight, the band is playing one of my favorite albums straight through: *Kind Of Blue*, by Miles Davis.

When I walk in, I close my eyes and let the slow, sultry notes of “Blue in Green” wrap around me like a warm blanket. Then I pick my way to one of

the small café tables near the stage, sink into a chair, and order a whiskey. When it comes I sip slowly, breathing deeply and letting the music work its magic.

Here, I can forget the weight of my family's expectations, the tangled mess of my life, and, for a while, even Damian. The soft wails of the trumpet and the steady thrum of the upright bass drift through the room, grounding me.

Jazz has been my escape for longer than I can remember: it's the perfect mix of structure and chaos and just *makes sense* to me when nothing else does. It's a temporary relief, but it's enough. And this place has always been a refuge, a space where I can just exist without the pressures and dangers of the world weighing down on me.

Suddenly the air shifts, a chill creeping down my spine.

I stiffen and the gentle caress of the music stops soothing me as what feels like a dark shadow falls over me.

I don't need to look to know who it is; I can *feel* his presence, like an inky cloud spreading through the room. But I do anyway.

Damian stands near the doorway, his head tilted to the side and an unreadable, slightly demented look in his eyes as they land on me.

That *motherfucker*. He's intruded upon the one place I thought I could escape him.

He moves through the room confidently, unhurried, as if he fucking owns the place. He doesn't come for me right away, strolling instead to the bar. The bartender brings him a drink without a word, and Damian lifts his glass, gaze fixed straight ahead, completely ignoring me—but I know he's aware of every move I make.

I grip my own glass, practically hard enough to crack it. This is *my* place, *my* sanctuary, and he's turned it into a battlefield without saying a word.

Slowly, he slips away from the bar and strolls right over, watching the band as he takes a seat across the little table from me, his proximity instantly setting me on edge.

The music fills the silence between us, but I can feel the tension simmering just below the surface. I turn back to watch the band, refusing to look at him, but his presence is like a weight pressing down on me, unyielding, inescapable.

When the band finishes their set, the last note hovering in the air, Damian clears his throat, a quiet yet commanding sound that makes the musicians exchange uneasy glances. His voice cuts through the room, low and assertive. “I’d say this is a good time for a break.”

The effect is immediate. The musicians nod, hurriedly packing up their instruments as the other patrons begin to rise, leaving their seats without a word. Even the bar staff moves quickly, avoiding eye contact as they file out as if on cue. Within moments, the once-lively club is empty, leaving only Damian and me in the silence.

I slowly turn to stare at him, stunned, my heart pounding. “How the *fuck* did you do that?!” I seethe, my voice tinged with a mix of fear and anger. I’ve always prided myself on being in control, especially here. But now Damian has invaded my space and made it his own with a single command.

He smiles, a dark, twisted curl in his lips that sends a shiver down my spine. “Want a few pro tips? I’m always happy to help the little guy.”

I grip my glass tighter, barely resisting the urge to throw it at him.

Damian leans back, his posture relaxed but watching me with a predatory intensity that leaves me feeling exposed. “Let’s make one thing clear,” he says, his voice low, a warning in his tone. “When we get to Tokyo, you’ll report to me. In business, and…” His grin turns hungry. “Well, everything else.”

My pulse quickens, fear and anger flooding my veins, but I hold his gaze, refusing to back down. “I don’t report to anyone. I run the legitimate business side of the Mori-kai. I’ll work *with* you, but I won’t—”

He cuts me off with a cold laugh, his smile widening. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out his phone, and holds it up. My stomach drops as I see the email I’d showed him, the one where I’d confessed to laundering money. It’s addressed to my whole family.

“This is the one you already sent, yes?”

My heart thuds.

“Go on,” he says with mock innocence. “Hit send. If you’re telling the truth and they’ve already read it, there’s no harm, right?”

My breath catches, my mind racing.

He knows. He fucking *knows* I was lying. I try to shrug it off, to keep my expression neutral, but I can feel the color draining from my face.

Damian’s smirk widens, his gaze dark and calculating. He leans closer, his voice dropping to a whisper that sends chills down my spine. “Mmm… That’s what I thought.”

The silence stretches between us, thick with tension.

“Hands on the table,” he says quietly.

I shiver. “What?”

“Put your hands on the table,” he growls. “*Now*.”

I could question what the fuck this is. I could resist. But… He’ll get my hands on the table one way or another.

The other night’s events involving my panties being pulled off are a pretty good indicator of that.

Swallowing, I put my hands palm down on the table in front of me.

“Good girl.”

My eyes dart to his, my cheeks flushing. Damian just smirks, his violet eyes flickering like dark magic in the low light.

“Now clasp them together.”

My pulse skips as I do as he says, lacing my fingers together.

“Now what,” I mutter.

“Now…this.”

He reaches into his jacket pocket. When his hand withdraws, there's a length of thin black string dangling from his fingertips. Without any preamble, Damian leans forward and deftly wraps the length of it around both my wrists.

Initially, my pulse jumps and my brain short-circuits as the immediate reaction hits me.

Don't tie me up. Please. Not my hands…

But as he starts to wrap the soft string around my wrists, then my hands, something changes. The panic begins to melt. The fear doesn't spike like usual.

Damian keeps going, wrapping the string around each finger and thumb, lacing it back over my hands and wrists, until they're…

I look at them.

What the fuck.

While he was doing it, it seemed random. But when I look now, it's not random at all. It's meticulously neat and symmetrical. It looks like art.

Dark, erotic art.

"I'm curious," he growls quietly. "You seem to think—and assert quite loudly—that you don't like being bound." I shiver as he leans forward. "And *yet*, every fucking time I do it to you, you look like you're seconds away from begging me to make you come."

He hooks a finger into one of the loops around my hands and uses it to tug me closer across the table toward him.

"*Why is that*, Hana?"

My throat bobs. "I…" I shrug. "You're delusional. That's not what I look like, and I have no interest in you trying to make—"

"Not *trying*," he chuckles. "I already have." He leans in more. "*Twice*."

Suddenly, he pulls me even closer. His other hand slips under the table, and I gasp quietly when I feel it on my knee.

“The fact is, Kitsune,” he murmurs. “You really *do* look like you’re telling the truth when you profess to hate being tied up. And yet, even now for example, I’m sure if my hand were to explore…”

He pulls my knees apart. His fingers tease up the smoothness of my inner thigh and under my skirt.

“I bet I’d find your little pussy *dripping*—”

Reality hits me like a punch to the face, shaking me from whatever trance he’s got me in. Instantly, I yank away from him, stumbling out of my chair as I rip my bound hands from his grip and back away from him. I scrabble at the string with my teeth, wrenching it off my hands and wrists and pulling it off completely before tossing it onto the table between us.

“*Stop trying to play my therapist*,” I hiss, my head swimming with nausea. “And stay the fuck away from me.”

He doesn’t follow when I bolt from the club.

…I *hate* the disappointment that wells inside me when he doesn’t.

* * *

I DRIVE BACK to the house in a numb haze.

Damian has invaded every corner of my life, and I’m running out of ways to push him back.

Just as I reach my private wing, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out and glance at the screen—it’s Daichi, the owner of the Golden Monkey. Relief softens the tension in my shoulders. When I fled the club, I’d sent him a text, checking in.

I answer quickly. “Daichi,” I say, expecting to hear his usual easy tone, but he sounds tired, his voice heavy with something close to regret.

“Hana,” he says, his voice strained. “I got your message. I wish I had better news.”

A chill settles over me. “About what?” I ask.

“I sold the club, Hana,” he says quietly.

My heart drops.

“*What*?” I choke. “Daichi, *why*?”

He sighs. “It was getting to be too much, my dear. I loved it, and have loved it for decades, like my father. But the bills have been piling up, and the place needs a new roof, and…” He exhales. “And then last night, someone made a cash offer no one in their right mind could refuse.”

My breath hitches, and my fingers tighten around the phone. “Who?”

He hesitates, as if unwilling to say, but finally his answer slips through the line. “A Russian-American guy. A bit creepy, if I’m being honest. Peculiar eyes.”

Mother. *Fucker*.

“He paid in cash, Hana,” Daichi finally says. “I’m sorry.”

For a moment, I can’t respond. Damian didn’t just invade my sanctuary—he *owns* it now. My grip tightens around the phone and I force myself to keep my tone steady, even though the fury bubbling inside threatens to spill over.

“Thanks for letting me know,” I say quietly, hanging up before Daichi can respond. I stand there for a moment, still holding the phone, my mind racing. My second home, the one place I could always go to feel safe, is gone.

A surge of anger fills me, hot and blinding, but beneath it is a darker, deeper realization that chills me to my core: Damian’s reach now extends into every corner of my life, and he’s clearly willing to use it without hesitation. Nothing is off limits.

I take a shaky breath, struggling to calm myself. When I enter my bedroom, I stop cold.

A small, neatly wrapped black box sits on the edge of my bed, tied with a red silk bow. A folded origami crane rests on top, bound with red yarn, its wings pinned tightly.

A chill runs through me as I approach it, every instinct screaming.

With trembling hands, I reach for the box, pulling the bow loose and lifting the lid.

Holy FUCKING—

I nearly scream as I drop the box back onto the bed and scramble away. My heart lurches into my throat and I almost vomit, clamping my hands tight over my mouth, squeezing my eyes shut.

Inside the box are ten neatly severed *fingers*.

All in a row, the skin pale and stiff. I could wonder who they belong to, but the gift-giver has thoughtfully made that abundantly clear by leaving Johnny Dae-Kim's telltale gaudy red and gold garnet ring in place on his right index finger.

I stagger back to the bed, slam the lid back onto the box, and then back away from it, shuddering.

My skin feels cold, clammy, and my mind races, caught between horror and a dark memory that's hard to accept.

A certain conversation from the other night with Damian.

"I don't want your cranes."

"So, something more substantial next time, then."

Something more substantial…like the *fucking fingers* of the man who jumped me, tied me up, and tried to assault me.

The weight of all of it threatens to suffocate me as I sink down into the chair in the corner of my room, staring at the box on the bed, willing it to disappear.

What the fuck have I gotten myself into?

After a moment, I pull my phone from my pocket, my fingers shaking as I dial Kai's number. Our head of security picks up on the third ring, his tone alert.

"Hana?" he asks. "What's wrong?"

I try to keep my voice calm. "Nothing at all. Just wondering… Could you make sure the house is extra secure tonight?" I ask, trying to keep a cheery tone.

There's a pause on the other end, and I can hear faint movement, as if he's already checking. "Do you know of any specific threat?"

"No!" I blurt, forcing a laugh. "I was an idiot and watched a scary movie earlier, is all. So I'm just…" I cough lightly. "If you could?"

"Of course," Kai asserts, loyal as ever.

After I end the call, the silence of my room feels oppressive, the weight of Damian's "gift" hanging over me like a storm cloud. For a moment, I consider calling Takeshi, telling him everything.

But I don't.

Instead, I sit alone in my room, staring at the small, terrifying box.

Thinking of *him*.

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11

HANA

THE WORLD OUTSIDE BLURS, streaks of green and silver flashing past as the Shinkansen bullet train speeds toward Tokyo.

I sit in plush luxury in a private compartment, but the velocity of the train echoes the chaos swirling inside me. The frustration, the tension, the feeling of being completely out of control—all of it crashes over me in waves.

I can't escape Damian's clutches. His claws have dug in deep, and every move he makes only sinks them further into me.

Across from me, Kai sits silently, his usually calm, stoic presence slightly off-kilter. I notice his fingers twitching before he switches to picking at his cuticles.

"Did you bring some gum or anything?"

"I'm fine," he half-snaps. Instantly, his face twists with regret. "I'm sorry, Hana—"

"Don't be," I smile as I reach across and squeeze his hand. "I get it. We'll be there soon."

Kai is a heavy chain smoker, and this smoke-free train ride is driving him *nuts*. I offer him a sympathetic look, but he simply gives me a curt nod, his jaw set.

Once we've settled intoTokyo, we'll be guests at a dinner hosted by Miyamoto Katō at his estate—a massive compound in Denenchofu, in

Tokyo's Ota Ward. This is more than a visit; it's a show of strength and alliance. The Mori-kai and the Nikolayev families are expected to present themselves as a united front, and the stakes are too high for anything less than perfection.

Miyamoto clearly understands this is all for show, but we do still need to *give* the show if we're going to move forward with our plans for Tokyo. Miyamoto can't give his blessing to that and risk his own reputation if Damian and I don't sell the bullshit.

Which is just about the last thing I want to do. Ever.

Just as I take a deep breath, I hear a low, significant cough behind me. I turn, irritation rising as I see the devil himself standing there, a faint, smug smile playing at his lips. He looks down at me, his expression unreadable but his presence impossible to ignore.

He inclines his head toward Kai, his voice a low growl. "Leave us."

Kai doesn't flinch, though I see his jaw tighten. His gaze remains fixed on the world flashing by outside the window, but his fingers tap against his thigh in a steady rhythm. "I'm here to watch over Miss Mori," he replies, his voice as rough as ever, but edged with irritation.

Damian's jaw tightens as he regards Kai with a smoldering intensity. "Leave me alone with my fiancée," he repeats, his voice cold, the threat unmistakable, "or I'll throw you off this fucking train."

Kai's gaze flicks toward me, questioning, waiting for my signal. I let out a slow sigh, feeling caught. The last thing I need right now is a confrontation. "It's fine, Kai. I'll be all right," I say, my tone resigned.

Reluctantly, Kai rises, shooting Damian a sharp, warning look before stepping away, his posture rigid with displeasure. As he moves to the other end of the car, the full weight of Damian's gaze settles on me, dark amusement mixed with something sharper and more possessive as he sinks into the seat across from me.

We sit in silence for a moment, the discreet hum of the train filling the tension-laden air. I keep my gaze focused on the view outside as we

approach Mt. Fuji, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of acknowledging his presence. But Damian, as always, is undeterred.

“You know,” he says quietly, “it’s customary to thank someone when they give you a gift.”

My eyes snap to his, incredulous. “*Fingers*?!” I hiss quietly. “*Are you fucking deranged*?!”

I mean what the fuck do you even *do* with fingers? I ended up walking to the front gate of the estate last night holding that creepy fucking box and asking one of Kenzo’s guys to take it to a crematorium I know my brother has…*utilized.*..before.

Damian shrugs casually, making my blood boil. “Probably. At least, most shrinks I’ve seen think so. But what do they know?” He smirks at me. “I thought you’d appreciate the gesture.”

“Why?” I snap, barely keeping my voice in check.

“He tried to hurt you,” Damian continues, his growl dark and unyielding. “He laid his hands on you. So I took his fingers…” He pauses, his eyes glinting with sinister mirth. “Amongst other things.”

I swallow, a chill running through me. “Other things? Like…?”

“Like every appendage he has,” he replies, his voice almost nonchalant. “Rather, had. Plus his life.”

The bluntness of his words hits me like a slap, my mind reeling as I process the full extent of what he’s saying. And that he did it *for* me, in *my* name… It’s unsettling.

Yet deep down there’s a part of me that feels something else dark and twisted that I can’t admit, not even to myself.

“You’re a monster,” I whisper, hoping my words will mask the confusion swirling inside me.

Damian only smirks, his dark eyes never leaving mine. “You’re just going to have to get used to me,” he says, his tone at once mocking and possessive.

I feel a flare of anger, and I shift in my seat, determined to regain control. “Miyamoto knows this is all bullshit,” I tell him. “He’s not fooled by this engagement charade. He understands it’s just for show.”

Damian’s smirk fades slightly. “We both know what’s at stake here, Kitsune. So we’re going to play this completely by the book.”

I scoff, frustration building as I fight to maintain my composure. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means, Kitsune…” He leans closer, his presence overwhelming, suffocating. “That you’re going to be my fiancée, and you’re going to sell the *shit* out of the role.”

I roll my eyes. “In public, yeah,” I mutter, though even as I say it, I can feel my pulse quicken and my resolve falter under his intense gaze. “I’m going to play your fiancée in *public*.”

His lips curl into a dark smile and he reaches out to brush a finger along the edge of my chin. “And in private,” he murmurs, his voice sending a shiver through me.

A blush creeps up my cheeks and I inhale deeply, struggling to keep my composure. “What happened the other night,” I begin, my voice wavering despite my best efforts, “is never happening again.”

His smirk widens, dark amusement flashing in his eyes.

“Which time, though?” he asks, a mocking edge to his voice that makes my face heat even more. He leans back, his fingers tapping idly on the armrest, as if he has all the time in the world to sit here and torment me.

I grit my teeth, hating the way he’s clearly enjoying every second of this. “Any of the times,” I snap, with as much conviction into my voice as possible. “It’s never happening again.”

Even as I utter the words, a small part of me doubts them. The memory of his strong hands on my skin, the way he looked at me with such possessive hunger—it’s all too raw, too recent. I hate this effect he has on me, that he’s able to pull me in with a single look or touch.

Damian watches me for a moment, his gaze unwavering, and then he leans in, close enough that I can feel his breath against my skin, hot and unyielding. His voice, barely a whisper, cuts through the silence like a blade.

“We’ll see about that, Kitsune.”

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12

DAMIAN

THE KING EXECUTIVE Suite at the Conrad Tokyo Hotel is nothing short of opulent. Modern, elegance personified, and, as the name suggests, fit for royalty, with panoramic views of Tokyo's skyline.

It's also home while we're here laying the foundations for the Mori-Nikolayev expansion into Tokyo.

I let Hana step in first, watching her carefully as her gaze sweeps over the polished wood, silk drapes, and understated luxury that fills every inch of the place.

I wait silently as she scans the suite, her expression shifting subtly as she walks across the open-concept main room with massive floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. My lips curl at the corners as she gets to the double doors leading into the grand bedroom and bath.

The *only* bedroom.

Her shoulders tense and a flicker of outrage flashes across her features before she turns to me, her eyes blazing.

"There's only *one* bed."

I shrug. "People engaged to be married *do* tend to share a bed."

"Not those who are waiting until marriage," she throws back tersely, her cheeks reddening as she avoids my gaze.

I shrug. “Still just the one bed…”

I watch in amusement as her face flushes with frustration, her jaw tight, lips pressed into a line. She opens her mouth, then closes it again.

“But *plenty* of couches,” she finally mutters, her tone clipped. “So, bedroom’s all yours. I’m going to go take a shower before dinner…”

Her brows knit as she stalks across the open space into the kitchen area, glancing around.

I grin. “Just one bathroom, too.”

Hana’s mouth is pursed tightly as she opens a closet door, clearly still not believing me. “Who the fuck booked this suite?”

“I did.”

She shoots me a look. I lean back against the wall, crossing my arms as I watch her. She’s obviously rattled, and for some reason watching her struggle to keep her composure only fuels my satisfaction.

It’s like the idea of seeing how far I can push her before she snaps somehow gets me *hard*.

“So, the bedroom is all mine?”

“*Yup*,” she snaps, marching back across the room toward the double doors to the master suite.

I get there first, stepping casually in front of her.

“Since we’ve established that this is in fact *my* room, I think it’s only fair that you ask nicely for permission to enter it.”

Hana’s eyes narrow. “You’re joking.”

“Frequently, yes. But not right now.”

She rolls her eyes, turning away to shove her fingers through her platinum blonde hair.

“May I *please* take a fucking shower before our extremely important dinner,” she mutters through clenched teeth.

I smile. “Certainly.” I step aside and gesture magnanimously. “After you, princess.”

She huffs as she pushes past me into the master suite, making a beeline for the opulent bathroom. When I walk in right behind her, she whips her head around to glare daggers at me.

“Um, what the hell are you doing?”

I love the way her face heats when I unbutton my shirt, pull it off my shoulders and toss it aside.

“Showering before dinner.”

“Asshole!” she hisses, her face turning red as she stares at me. “Get out!”

Hana’s mouth falls into an “O” shape as I undo my belt and drop my pants. She quickly looks away, her arms folded over her chest.

“Fine, whatever. You shower first, then—”

“We’re actually in a *bit* of a time crunch for dinner at Miyamoto’s house,” I say, casually dropping my boxer briefs and standing naked in front of her. “Now or never, princess.”

“I—”

Hana turns back to throw some other smart remark my way. That’s when she realizes I’m naked. I smirk as her eyes drop *right* to my cock, widening a little as her mouth opens.

“Take a picture. It’ll last longer.”

Her face turns crimson as she yanks her eyes up to glare at me. “I wasn’t—”

“*Sure* you weren’t,” I grin, walking past her toward the huge glass walk-in shower. I reach inside and turn on the hot water before glancing back at her. “So… Are you joining me or not?”

Hana’s lips purse. “*Not*.”

I chuckle to myself as I turn my back and step into the shower. “Yeah, I figured.”

She manages to wait an entire fifteen seconds before responding.

“What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?”

I grin as I push my fingers through my wet hair and turn back to face her.

“It’s further to what I said before. You’re the safe one. The one in charge of the legitimate business. Spreadsheets, board meetings, earnings reports.” I shrug. “That’s fine. It’s good to know where your comfort zone is. Some people are just…risk averse.”

My smirk widens as I turn my back on her, the hot water cascading down, steam curling up and fogging the glass. I can practically feel her bristling on the other side of the glass. She’s stubborn: every word I said was designed to get under her skin, and it’s working. I reach for the shampoo, letting the silence drag on.

Just when I’m beginning to think she’s going to let it go, I hear the door swing open and then shut again. The steam swirls as she steps inside, her back to me as she turns on the second showerhead and steps underneath it.

The corners of my mouth lift as I watch her. Neither of us speaks as the water rushes over her, and for a moment, the only sound is the steady rhythm of the shower. She’s quiet, composed, refusing to look my way.

But that’s fine. I’ve got a *very* nice view of her perfect, tight ass. And when she starts to push her fingers through her wet hair, her eyes closed, her body swivels just a bit, giving me a glimpse of the pert swell of her tits and a peek at a dark rosy nipple.

My dick swells to iron instantly.

I step back under the spray, my eyes only partly closed. A grin tugs the corners of my mouth when I catch Hana looking at me over her shoulder, her eyes dropping right to my throbbing hard cock as her mouth makes that cute little “O” again.

“It’s rude to stare.”

She jolts, whipping back away from me and abruptly shutting off the water. She shoots me a glare, blushing as she steps from the shower and wraps a towel around herself before marching out of the bathroom.

When I'm done, I towel off and then casually walk—naked—through the bedroom into the huge, walk-in dressing room. Our things were delivered here before we arrived, so there are full wardrobes—which I've added to at my discretion—already hung on either side.

Hana doesn't hear me as I move to the doorway, watching as she slips into a charcoal gray business skirt and matching jacket.

Hana glances into the mirror in front of her and jumps when she spots me. Her face darkens and she looks away.

"Could you *please* put on some fucking clothes."

I don't. I lean against the doorframe, raising an eyebrow as I take in the severe cut of her attire, so at odds with the evening we're about to have and its setting. She straightens, meticulously adjusting her cuffs, her expression serious as she meets my gaze in the mirror.

"For fuck's sake, *what,*" she finally mutters.

I remain silent as I walk over to my side, pulling on boxers, black dress pants, crisp white shirt and dinner jacket.

"Well?" Hana says pointedly.

"Nothing. You look very serious, Madam Ambassador."

She rolls her eyes. "We're here to conduct *business*, Damian," she says, her tone matter-of-fact.

"Not *that* kind of business."

I walk past her, tapping my chin before I spot the violet cocktail dress I was looking for—one of my additions to her wardrobe. I pull it from the rack and turn to lift it up in front of her.

"This one."

Hana arches a brow. For a glimmer of a second, I can *see* she likes it. I know for a fact she doesn't always dress for boardrooms and earnings reports. I've seen her dressed to kill before. But her stubbornness and need to oppose me rears up. And, yep, there it is: the rolling eyeballs defense mechanism.

"I'm not wearing that. It's inappropriate."

I smirk as I glance at the bare back, the plunging neckline that delves like a spear between the breasts halfway to the navel. The severely angled hemline from ankle to almost hip, with the huge slit that reveals most of a thigh.

"I disagree."

"You would," she throws back. "I'm not here to indulge the male gaze."

"No indeed," I counter, my voice firm. "You're here to steal the fucking air out of the room. And you'll do it in this."

She glances at the dress, raising an unamused eyebrow. "No. That's not something I'd ever wear," she says, crossing her arms defiantly. "I'm just not."

I close the distance between us in a heartbeat. Hana's throat bobs as I cage her against the shelves of the dressing room. When I reach for her blouse, her breath catches as I grip it firmly near her sternum and yank it out of her skirt.

"Yes," I growl, leaning in close. "*You are*."

She scoffs, struggling to get away, her voice a low, indignant hiss. "Let me go, you barbarian," she snaps. Her defiance only fuels me, a fire that burns even hotter with every attempt she makes to break free.

Without a word, I grab her wrists and shove them over her head. Hana's eyes go wide as I grab a random blouse from the rack next to her and bind her wrists together firmly without any ceremony.

"*Damian*!"

Her face blooms pink as I wrap the other sleeve of the blouse around one of the shelving posts, yanking her arms up tight before securing the whole thing with a thick knot.

“What the *fuck*—”

“Stay still.”

She gasps sharply when I grab her skirt and pull it down, letting it fall to the floor.

“Damian!”

I ignore her protests as I yank the buttons open on her blouse and shove it and the jacket off her shoulders. They’re not going anywhere with her arms pinned and tied above her head.

…But luckily, I always carry my knife.

Hana stares at me like I’ve got three heads as I flick open the switchblade and deftly bring it to the fabric of her blouse.

“*What the fucking hell are you*— DAMIAN!”

She swears and bucks and twists as I slice her blouse away. The all-business jacket goes, too, until she’s standing there barefoot and bound in just a black bra and panties.

“Yeah, that’s not going to work with this dress,” I shrug, bringing the knife up and slipping it under the front of her bra. Hana’s eyes bulge when I slice that away too, leaving her almost naked and powerless in front of me.

Her breath hitches and she freezes, her eyes locked on mine, a flicker of darkness flashing in her gaze.

For a moment there’s silence, her chest heaving with each shallow breath, her nipples tight and erect, her skin textured with goosebumps, her stomach caving with each breath. Her expression is a mixture of anger and… excitement. I smirk, catching the hint of vulnerability in her gaze as I reach for the gown and pull it off the hanger.

I drop to a knee in front of her, nodding at her foot. “Lift.”

I watch her thigh muscles tense.

“Kicking me would *not* be recommended,” I growl.

Her muscles unclench. Slowly, she lifts one foot, then the other.

“Good girl.”

Hana is silent as I slide the dress up her legs, standing to slip it over her hips and then pull it up the top half of her tempting body.

“I’m going to undo your wrists,” I growl quietly, my eyes locked on hers. “*Behave*.”

She purses her lips, her face blooming with heat. But when I undo the blouse keeping her tied tight, she doesn’t fight. She just watches me with throbbing intensity as I slip the gown up over her breasts and adjust the strap around the back of her neck.

She glares at me as I adjust the dress. But I can see the flicker of excitement in her eyes despite her protests, the faint blush that stains her cheeks. She’s just as affected by this as I am.

I select a pair of strappy heels, kneeling down to slip them onto her feet, taking my time.

I was hard before. But my dick *aches* as I wind the black ribbon around her calves, as if binding her exquisitely, my own little work of art. Her breathing hitches, and though she looks away, I catch the way her pulse quickens and her cheeks flush.

“There,” she says, her voice tight as I stand. “Can we go now?”

Hana marches out of the dressing room, through the bedroom, and across the open living area to the suite door. Just as she gets there, I stop her with a firm hand on her arm. Without a word I spin her back firmly against the door, and she gasps.

“Almost,” I growl.

Her eyes bulge as I yank up her gown, slip my hand under, and slide my fingers into the gusset of her panties. There’s a pleading neediness all over

her face as I peel the lacy thong down her legs, dropping to one knee again to slip it over her strappy heels. I stand, my eyes locked with hers as I slip her panties into my jacket pocket.

Her cheeks are crimson as she stares up at me, a mix of shock and barely concealed desire in her eyes. I smirk, trailing a finger along her jaw as I step back, leaving her with an unforgettable reminder of my control.

“*Now* we can go.”

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13

HANA

I STEP out of the SUV pulled up outside Miyamoto's sprawling Denenchofu estate in Tokyo's Ota Ward and glance up at the house.

Damn.

The Katō estate is a modern homage to Himeji Castle, with towering walls, sloping rooftops, and stone walkways flanked by gorgeous sakura trees in full bloom. Lanterns cast a warm glow along the paths and surrounding gardens, and the crisp air carries the faint scent of cherry blossoms.

I've done my research on Miyamoto. Yes, he wants to retire, and yes, my father Hideo, did help him when they were younger. But his eagerness to merge his empire with the Mori-kai now isn't purely to repay the favor.

I glance back up at the opulent house.

Miyamoto likes to spend money, but he's not so great at making sure he's *got it* before he does. The man has debts, both financial and personal, and apparently a lot of those debt-holders are starting to come to collect.

I talked with Kenzo about it before I left Kyoto, and we both agree that Miyamoto *is* probably genuine when he says moving his empire under the Mori-kai banner is a way of paying back our father's help all those years ago.

But there's more to it than that.

Part of the merger is going to involve some money: a big chunk up front from us, plus Miyamoto will still receive a cut from the businesses he started after they become Mori-kai businesses.

Ironically, the financial need behind our host's decision to merge with our empire makes the deal more secure. If the man *didn't* have pressing debts and was trying to sell this as something purely altruistic, I'm not sure I'd trust it for a second.

Behind me, Kai unfolds his large frame from the back of another SUV and instantly lights the cigarette already hanging between his lips. Behind him, another equally large frame emerges—Issak, who's joining us in Tokyo as Damian's backup.

The big Russian frowns and shoots Kai a look. "That's a disgusting habit."

"I never asked for your opinion on my habits," Kai mutters back. "And you owe me a pack."

"You're lucky the cigarettes are the only thing I threw out the window after you tried to light up next to me," Isaak rumbles.

Kai rolls his eyes and glances at me.

"Play nice," I murmur in Japanese.

Kai exhales, then pauses as his eyes land on me.

"What?" I ask, frowning as I look down at myself, suddenly feeling extremely self-conscious in this damn gown, which is *way* more daring than anything I usually wear. "Too much?"

Kai lifts a brow. "I think it's stunning on you, actually."

I grin, then jolt when a firm, powerful hand wraps around my hip and yanks me away from Kai. I almost fall into Damian's broad chest as my gaze rips up to his.

"*Yes,* Mr. Caveman?" I snap, frowning.

His eyes narrow. "Try to remember who you're engaged to here."

I smile icily. "The correct answer, actually, is *no one*."

He lifts one brow, his lips curling dangerously. “*Careful*, Kitsune,” he growls under his breath.

“Of what? You?” I scoff. “Believe me, Damian, you *never* need to worry if women are being careful around you. Trust me: they all are.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“Wasn’t a compliment.”

We all start to head inside—Kai, Issak—who’s still glaring—and an assortment of Mori-kai and Nikolayev men. I start to follow but gasp when Damian’s hand closes tight around my wrist, pulling me back against him.

“You *need* to stop doing that,” I hiss.

Damian suddenly dips his mouth to my neck. He inhales sharply, as if *smelling me*. Then his lips part, trailing over my skin in a way that sends electric shivers rippling through my core. His teeth nip at my neck, and when I gasp, his hand slides down my bare back to grip my ass boldly.

“Don’t you *dare*—”

“The shower games and…later…were fun,” he growls against my neck. “But I think you’ve forgotten, Kitsune, what I hold over you.”

I stiffen as his words slither over me. Damian grins against my neck before he pulls back. His breathtaking, supernaturally violet eyes pierce into me with a darkness that’s as terrifying as it is addictive.

“Still threatening to blackmail me?” I breathe.

Damian’s mouth curls at the edges as his eyes narrow. “Not threatening, Kitsune,” he murmurs. He leans close, cupping my jaw and running his thumb over my bottom lip. “I *am* blackmailing you.”

Dark, twisted need claws at my core.

“Let’s make sure we’re on the same page. While we’re here in Tokyo, you *will* be my fiancée, in every definition of the word. Publicly *and* privately.”

“You can’t—”

“I can,” he murmurs. “So—we’re going to walk in there. You’re going to be on my arm, holding my hand, looking to all the world that you’re *mine* and mine alone. Flirt with your fucking security guard again, and you’ll find another wrapped present on your bed.”

I glare at him. “Seriously? Flirting? With *Kai*?”

“I’m considering how all those old *Oyabuns* and eager, corruptible politicians inside might view it. But also—yes.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, I wasn’t. Are we done?”

His eyes glint as his smile turns cold. “Not quite.”

Without warning, Damian suddenly pulls up the front of my gown and slips his hand underneath. My eyes go wide and my breath catches sharply as I feel his hand against my bare sex.

“Are you *insane*!?” I hiss, squirming to get away. But he holds me fast with his other hand as the first one…

Holy shit…

At first, I thought he was just trying to touch me. But then I feel something smooth and cool press against my slick opening, and my mouth falls open.

“*Damian—*”

My words choke, my body throbbing as I feel him push something egg-shaped inside me. It sinks in—wide at first and then narrowing as he lodges it inside of me against my g-spot.

“What the hell is—*fuuuck*…”

When the buzzing starts, my legs almost give out. I shudder, clinging to his shirt and jacket and sagging against him, my eyes rolling back.

Sweet fucking *fuck*.

Damian’s fingers tease over my pussy lips, his thumb rolling over my clit as the little toy he’s just slipped into me begins to buzz and vibrate. My toes curl inside my shoes, my legs literally shaking and my throat strangling my breath as my eyes squeeze shut.

“*Oh my fucking God…*”

“Nope, just batteries and me,” Damian murmurs. “But I could certainly get used to you calling me that.”

“*Asshole*,” I whimper, still clinging to him for dear life.

“*Dirty* girl,” he mock-gasps against my ear. “Right here and now? Goodness. Well, if you insist…”

My eyes go wide as his hand slips deeper between my thighs, moving back until I feel the pad of his finger tease against my tight back hole.

“*Damian!*”

For one brief, horrifying second, I think I’m about to fucking come, right here on the front steps of Miyamoto’s mansion. Instantly, though, the buzzing clicks off. Damian’s hand slips from under my dress, smoothing it down before he pats my hip.

“Mustn’t be late, Kitsune.”

My pulse roars in my ears, my entire body shaking and on edge.

I almost came. I literally almost *orgasmed* right here.

“You bastard—”

“Uh-uh, Kitsune,” Damian murmurs, capturing my hand as I try to reach under my dress to pull out the damn toy. “That stays right where it is.”

My eyes snap to his, horrified. “*No*—”

“*Yes*,” he growls. He takes my hand in his, turning me on still wobbly legs and leading me to the front door. “Now, try to remember how much you fucking love me," he smirks as a pair of Miyamoto’s men approach to take us inside.

I bite back a retort, forcing to compose myself for the sake of our audience. The entire evening hinges on the illusion of a harmonious union between our families, sealed by our supposed engagement. I can’t look like I *hate* Damian right now. But I shouldn’t look like I was just two seconds away from an explosive orgasm, either.

As we walk toward the grand entrance, Damian leans in, his lips brushing lightly against my neck. “How does it feel?” he murmurs.

"You're enjoying this *far* too much," I hiss through clenched teeth.

"Only because you make it so entertaining, Kitsune,” he replies softly, his breath warm on my skin.

We step into the grand dining room, where Miyamoto himself awaits us along with the other guests for the evening.

He beams at us, looking like he probably started happy hour some time ago. He lets go of the arm of the gorgeous woman standing by his side, who looks *far* younger than him, and approaches us with a big smile.

“Ahh! Welcome, Hana-san, Damian-san," he says, bowing deeply. "I am honored to have you here."

"Thank you for hosting us," I reply, returning the bow with practiced elegance.

The dining hall is breathtaking—a seamless blend of traditional Japanese style and understated European opulence. Tatami mats line the floor, while shoji screens artfully divide up the space. Ornate woodwork adorns the walls, and soft lighting casts a golden hue over everything, creating an atmosphere both intimate and grand.

We’re guided to a long table set with immaculate precision. Seated around it are mid-level yakuza bosses, their underlings, and a couple of influential local politicians. Kai sits near the entrance to the room, ever-watchful. Isaak sits right next to him, and my brows knit a little when I catch the two of them muttering at each other under their breath while appearing to look straight ahead.

Great, those two are already bickering like little old ladies.

I push the thought aside as I take my seat beside Damian. I’m acutely aware of the dress and the attention it draws. The fabric clings in all the right places, the deep violet standing out vividly against my pale skin. It might be a far cry from my usual attire, but I can't deny the surge of confidence it

gives me. Damian catches my eye, a smirk on his lips. I look away, refusing to give him the satisfaction.

"Stealing the air out of the room," he whispers.

"Good," I reply curtly. "That was the point, right?"

Miyamoto stands at the head of the table, raising his glass in welcome. "Thank you all for joining me this evening," he begins. "Tonight, we celebrate not just an alliance between families but the promise of a prosperous future for all."

Polite applause follows, glasses clinking softly as toasts are exchanged. The first course is served—delicate plates of sashimi, arranged like works of art. Lighthearted banter and conversation flows around the table, which in many cases I'm sure is covering subtle negotiations being woven beneath the surface.

"Hana-san," Miyamoto addresses me warmly, "I must tell you again what a good man your father was. Bold but wise, and precise in all things. I see much of him in you."

"A generous compliment indeed," I reply, offering a respectful nod.

As the meal progresses, I find myself fully engaged in discussion with Miyamoto as well as several other Yakuza family heads. We touch on economic strategies, potential alliances, and the shifting landscapes of power within Tokyo, especially the Ishida-kai's steady rise.

Suddenly, without warning, I feel warm pressure on my thigh. Damian's hand rests just above my knee, his fingers lightly brushing the fabric of my gown. My posture stiffens, but I keep my gaze firmly on the middle-aged man across from me, refusing to give any indication of discomfort.

Damian's hand moves slightly higher, his fingers walking up the side of my thigh, tracing small, deliberate circles. A subtle heat blooms under his touch, and I quickly drop my hand beneath the table to shove his away.

Right, as if. Trying to shift his hand off my thigh is like trying to move a building. I wince as his grip tightens, sending a needy, aching throb through

my core, making me stutter and completely lose my train of thought mid-sentence.

"Is everything all right?" asks one of the politicians I've been speaking to, his eyes flickering curiously.

"Perfectly," I assure him with an easy smile. "I was just thinking back to your last point."

When he nods and smiles, sipping his sake and turning to the man next to him, I snap my gaze to Damian.

"*Stop it*," I hiss under my breath.

Damian smiles benignly at me as his hand slides a little higher, making my pulse jump.

"Stop what?"

I glare at him. "I swear—"

My entire body shudders as the toy inside me suddenly buzzes to life. I gasp sharply, clinging to the edge of the table as waves of pleasure slam into me.

"Ms. Mori?" Kai frowns as he starts to stand.

"I—"

"She's fine, Kai," Damian says authoritatively, smiling dismissively at Kai as his hand slips all the way up my thigh. "Just something down the wrong pipe." He turns to smirk at me. "Isn't that right, *dear*?"

Without warning, his hand cups my bare pussy. The pressure of his hand somehow intensifies the buzzing of the toy inside, and I can feel my head swimming as pleasure pulses through me. Somehow, I force a weak smile as I turn to wave Kai off. "Yes, I'm fine. Thank you."

"Ms. Mori," Miyamoto says as he takes a heavy drink from his glass. "I was hoping you might bring to your brother's attention the opportunity for real estate development in the outer suburbs of Tokyo."

One of the local politicians—a city planning minister, I think—nods enthusiastically. "Indeed. As the train network continues to expand outward,

if one knew where the new stations were being planned, one could buy the land *around* those potential stations for a fraction of the cost now, before they're announced."

I smile. "I think my brother Kenzo would love to have that conversation with you when he comes to visit Tokyo next month—"

I almost fall out of my chair as the buzzing ramps up. The fucking toy pulses and throbs and vibrates insanely against my g-spot, soaking my thighs. Worse, Damian's cupping my sex, running his fingers up and down my pussy lips and slowly rubbing his thumb over my swollen clit.

"Ms. Mori?" Miyamoto says with concern. "Are you sure—"

"*I'm fine,*" I grit through clenched teeth. I glance at Damian, my eyes pleading with him to stop.

He *has to* stop, or I'm going to fucking come right here at the table. And I —I can't—I—

His thumb presses down. The pressure inside me explodes. And suddenly, as I pretend to cough into my napkin so I can cover my face, I'm fucking *coming*.

Hard.

The orgasm surges through me, wave after wave, even as I force myself to sit as still as possible, sure I'm going to humiliate myself and scream my release into the whole fucking dining room.

Except suddenly—mercifully—the buzzing stops.

Damian delicately slips his fingers to the little looped handle extending from the toy inside me and tugs. I gasp as I feel it slide wetly out of me.

My entire body is shaking. My thighs are quivering. My nipples are swollen and painfully hard against my gown as I turn to glare pure death at my smug, smiling fake fiancé.

…Who then brings his fingers to his lips and licks them clean, staring me dead in the eye before turning to our host.

“*Delicious* meal, Katō-san.”

* * *

WHEN DINNER IS OVER, Miyamoto invites us all into a grand lounge area for drinks and more discussion. As the group moves toward the double doors leading to the lounge, I hang back, frustration and fury twisting inside me. Damian is only a few steps away, and I can’t hold it in any longer. I reach for his arm, yanking him into a quiet corner, my eyes ablaze.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!?” I snap, glaring daggers at him.

The motherfucker *smiles*.

“I’m sorry, should I apologize for giving you an orgasm?”

“What you did was beyond inappropriate,” I hiss, struggling to keep my voice quiet as I unleash my fury, clenching my fists. “You made me look weak and distracted, like I’m some clueless fucking *girl* trying to play with the big boys.” I despise the flicker of vulnerability I feel, the way he’s pushed me into this raw, exposed state.

Damian leans closer, his voice soft yet laced with dark satisfaction. “You looked anything but weak, Kitsune,” he murmurs, his gaze locked on mine with a dangerous intensity that sends a thrill through me despite my anger.

“Do you have any idea how fucking patriarchal the Yakuza is?” I seethe. “How I have to fight just to be *invited* to a table like that? I need to grind three times as hard to be considered on equal footing with the men in this world,” I continue. “So *no*, Damian, I’m not going to thank you for fucking with me in the middle of a very important dinner in front of men I need to impress.”

I spin on my heel, hellbent on getting away from him to regain my composure.

It happens so fast I barely have time to choke on the scream.

Just as I step into Miyamoto’s lounge area, a shadow lunges from behind a decorative shoji screen, silver glinting in the dim light. My eyes go wide, a

silent scream dying on my lips as the attacker dressed all in black swings a blade down, aiming right for my chest.

A muscled, tattooed hand suddenly shoots out from behind me, grabbing the assailant's wrist in an iron grip and twisting violently. The man in black screams as Damian shoulders me aside, snapping the intruder's wrist and hurling the blade to the ground. In one motion, Damian smashes his wine glass against the doorframe and jams the jagged, broken stem into the man's throat.

Again, and again, and again.

My hands fly to my mouth, eyes bulging in terror as the would-be killer's screams turn to gurgles and a torrent of blood floods out of him.

The other guests are yelling and scrambling as Damian shoves the jagged wine-glass stem through the attacker's eye before finally dropping the body to the ground.

My pulse races like a train as he whirls toward me, his violet eyes wild, his silvery hair framing his vicious, gorgeous face flecked with blood. He reaches out as if to cup my face but stops himself just as his fingers brushes my jaw.

His hands are *soaked* in blood.

"*Kitsune—*"

A loud crash explodes though the lounge as one of the sliding glass doors to the gardens splinters inward. Four more masked attackers all in black rush in, their *katana* swords glinting in the low light.

The planning minister I was talking to about scooping up real estate chokes on his own blood as a blade rams into the back of his neck and comes out his mouth. Everything erupts into chaos: I catch sight of Isaak as one of the attackers slashes toward him, leaving a bloody gash across his shoulder. Kai charges forward with a roar, his movements brutally efficient as he takes Isaak's assailant down to the ground, stomping on the man's head repeatedly until he goes still.

Damian doesn’t waste a second. He grabs the blade from the fallen first man and charges the others, cutting down two of them as Miyamoto’s guards flood into the room.

Miyamoto himself steps forward, grunting as he grabs the last attacker around the neck, wrestling him to the floor before he pulls out a blade and buries it in the man’s throat.

Damian moves to my side as Miyamoto’s men surround us, blades out, shouting, checking perimeters. One goes to his boss, but Miyamoto just nods and waves him off before kneeling next to the man he just killed. Our host yanks up the attacker’s sleeve to examine the man’s tattoos.

He lifts his eyes to Damian and me, his face grave. “Ishida-kai,” he grunts, disgust and warning in his voice. “It appears your enemies wanted to welcome you to Tokyo personally.”

I nod, struggling to keep my voice steady as my head spins. “Yes…we…” But the room begins to blur, my vision cutting in and out as my knees buckle, and the last thing I feel is the cold floor beneath me before everything fades to black.

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DAMIAN

"CHRIST, WHAT A FUCKING SHIT-SHOW," Kir growls on the laptop screen, shaking his head. We're all back at the Conrad Tokyo—Hana up in our suite, and Isaak and I in his room, the weight of everything that just went down hanging over us as we speak with Kir via video call.

My uncle's expression is as cool as ever, ice-blue eyes flicking between Isaak's blood-streaked shoulder and my own tense demeanor as I tell him everything that happened. He's outwardly calm, but I can still see the fierce intensity behind his gaze, coiled rage barely contained as I detail the ambush.

Kir's always like this: total poker face on the surface while on the inside his mind forms plans, and backup plans, and backup-backup plans.

"And Miyamoto?" Kir's quiet voice cuts through the silence like a blade.

"He's good," I confirm. "I think he's better aware of the stakes now."

"That could go either way," Kir grunts.

I nod. "I think that this just cemented Miyamoto to us and the Mori-kai, actually. He breaks ranks now and he's truly fucked, he knows that. They knew we were together. I mean, they came right at Hana," I growl, my hands tightening to fists as my mind replays the blur of that first attacker lunging for her. "If he leaves us, the Ishida-kai will burn his empire to the fucking ground. No, it's us or death now for Miyamoto."

Kir nods slowly. “And how *is* Hana?”

The mention of her name brings back the memory of her fainting in my arms back at Miyamoto’s house. I remember how frighteningly gray her skin was as I carried her back to the car, then held her in the back seat as we drove back to the hotel.

That woman always presents herself to the world as tough as nails. Unbreakable. Unflappable. Completely put-together.

But tonight, I saw her vulnerability. I saw that she’s strong but not invincible.

And fuck, it *got to me*, more than I’d have ever imagined.

“She’s…fine,” I grunt, though my voice loses its edge. I know Kir especially has a soft spot for Hana, after the two of them and Freya were held for days in that dark hell where my uncle almost succumbed to sepsis after a bad infection. “Shaken, but unharmed.”

Kir’s gaze flickers with concern. “We knew the Ishida-kai wouldn’t take our expansion into Tokyo lying down. But this is a pretty fucking strong shot across the bow.”

“More like a shot *into* the bow,” Isaak grunts next to me.

Kir nods. “I think we need to consider things escalated. Tread carefully, Damian.”

After the call ends I turn to Isaak, nodding at the wound on his shoulder covered by a bandage he applied himself.

“Gonna live?”

Isaak smirks and shrugs nonchalantly. “To remind you, I was Special Forces for years before your uncle found me. This is just a scratch.”

I nod, then my brow furrows when my gaze moves from the bandage on his shoulder to the bruising on his neck.

“The fuck happened there?”

Isaak frowns, his hand coming up to his neck momentarily. Something flickers in his eyes but he quickly shrugs.

“Took a hit, I guess.”

I nod. “Well, be sure to thank your hero later.”

“Hmm?”

“Kai,” I clarify. “That motherfucker sure came to your aid pretty fast. That was lucky.”

A weird expression clouds Isaak’s face, then he looks away.

“Yes, very lucky he was there.”

I stand. “I’m going to head up to the suite. You good?”

“*Da,* all good…*malen’kiy prints*.”

I roll my eyes and flip him off. “You know I fucking hate when you call me that.”

Little prince. It’s what he used to call me when I was a boy, even though Isaak is all of like seven years older than me.

“*Da,* I do know.”

I snort. “Hope your cut itches like fuck under the bandage, jackass.”

I leave his room and make my way up to Hana’s and my suite. Various Nikolayev and Mori-kai men are watching over this entire hotel, even more so after what happened tonight.

But it’s Kai himself that I find standing guard outside our door, his posture keenly alert. He turns when he hears me approach, stiffening slightly.

Our exchanges have always been…well…short-tempered. But tonight, he nods at me.

“Thank you,” he grunts. “For protecting her.” He bows stiffly. “You fought well, Damian-san.”

I nod. “Well, so did you. I think you were Isaak’s knight in shining armor tonight.”

An odd expression crosses Kai’s face, and he shifts uncomfortably before he nods again.

“It’s my job,” he says curtly. He glances to the hotel suite door. “You’ll watch her tonight?”

I nod.

“Good. *Arigato gosaimatsu*, Damian-san.”

I watch Hana’s oddly quiet, reserved security guard stalk back toward the elevators before I step into the suite.

Inside, the whole place is cloaked in darkness save for a thin beam of light spilling from the bathroom. Humid warmth fills the air, and steam swirls lazily from the partly closed door. I frown, walking toward the muted sound of running water and pushing the door open.

Shit.

Hana is still in her gown, pacing back and forth under the scalding spray, her hands scrubbing at her skin frantically. Her movements are restless, her eyes wide and unfocused. The adrenaline and trauma are still coursing through her.

She’s in shock.

Without hesitation, I step into the shower fully clothed. The water drenches me immediately, but I barely notice. My focus is solely on Hana. She’s still scrubbing, as if trying to erase every trace of blood and violence. Her hands shake as they glide over her arms, her breath shallow and ragged.

“Hana…” I say, my voice firm but calm.

She flinches, turning to face me with wide, panicked eyes. “Don’t touch me,” she chokes, her voice laced with fear, her eyes wild and disoriented.

I grip her shoulders tightly, holding her still. “Stop moving,” I command, my tone full of authority. “It’s just the adrenaline. You need to breathe.”

For a second, she continues to fight, her hands pressing against me. But I hold my ground, refusing to let go. Her breaths are still short, panicked, her gaze darting around as if she's still trapped in the chaos. "Just breathe," I murmur, my steady voice anchoring her against the storm raging inside.

Slowly, her resistance falters. She's still trembling, but her fight is fading, her breathing becoming deeper and more controlled. My hands slide down her arms, guiding her back to reality. Her forehead rests on my chest, and the rapid jackhammering of her pulse against my hand slows.

She lifts her gaze to mine, her eyes vulnerable in a way I've never seen before. Water streams down her face, mingling with the remnants of blood and soap, and for a moment all I see is raw, unfiltered emotion—a chink in her usually impenetrable walls.

Something inside me shifts.

Breaks.

Before I know it, I'm reaching for her, my thumb brushing away a water droplet on her cheek as I cup her face.

"*What are you doing*," she whispers hoarsely.

"This."

My mouth slams to hers, my lips capturing hers in a fierce and brutal kiss, like a hurricane making landfall.

An unstoppable force hitting an immovable object.

And when I kiss her—for the first time, I realize, despite everything else that's occurred between us—the ground crumbles beneath my feet.

The world stops turning.

Her fingers clutch at my soaked shirt, kissing me back, a soft, desperate whimper on her lips.

It's a release. A catharsis.

Something I never, ever expected.

And now?

There’s no going back.

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HANA

THE WATER BEATS down around us, hot and heavy, but all I feel, taste and know is him.

Damian's kiss is rough, claiming, shattering every thought and fear, pulling me deeper, stripping away all my control until I'm left with only the burn of his mouth on mine.

He presses me harder against the cool tile of the shower wall, his hands roaming over me, pulling me closer. He breaks the kiss only to tilt his head, a dark gleam in his eye that's both thrilling and a warning before his mouth drops to my neck savagely. I cry out, my heartbeat stuttering as his teeth pierce the skin, soothing the tenderness he's created a moment later with his lips and tongue.

He lifts me, holding me in his unyielding grip, and I cling to him, my legs wrapped around his waist, weightless, floating, as he steps out of the shower and into the bedroom. The world around us blurs, shrinking to the heat between us, to our raw, reckless need.

He sets me down in the middle of the room and slowly begins to circle me, his jaw tight, his eyes fierce. Even when he walks behind me, I can feel his unrelenting gaze sear through me, igniting something dark and hidden.

Damian reaches for the thin neck strap of my dress at the back and tugs sharply, making me gasp as he rips it. The gown slips down my body, the fabric pooling at my feet as he continues his slow, predatory walk until he's in front of me again.

Watching me. Devouring my nakedness with his gaze.

He turns his head, nodding to the padded bench at the foot of the bed.

“Kneel.”

His low, rough voice sends a jolt through me. Instinctively, before I even know what I’m doing, I’m stepping softly across the floor to the bench. Raw electricity claws up my spine as I sink down onto the bench, my skin prickling with anticipation.

I don’t even know or recognize what version of me this is.

And I don’t care. Because I *want* this—the dark, reckless part of him that calls to that same darkness in me.

Damian drifts behind me, his hands landing on my hips.

“Face the window.”

A needy pulse throbs inside me as I obey, turning sideways on the soft bench, still kneeling.

Something soft and thick lands on my shoulder before falling across one breast. I glance down and my pulse jumps when I see the silky, braided red rope tumbling down into my cleavage. Damian tugs softly, pulling the end of it, letting it tease across one pebbled, tight nipple.

“Tonight, *Kitsune*,” he growls deep into my ear, “I’m going to show you what being mine *really* means.”

I gasp as he grabs my hands and tugs them behind my back.

“Do you know what *shibari* is?”

My pulse skips as I nod my head.

Obviously, given my history, I’ve never tried it. But I know that *shibari* is the Japanese technique of using rope in visually pleasing ways to bind a partner—sometimes even to bind oneself.

It’s about the artistry of it as much as it is the restraint. Still, the very idea of it has always freaked me out.

But now?

I’m *excited*.

Damian crosses my wrists at the small of my back, and I shiver when I feel the silky rope slither and coil around them. He loops it again, wrapping the rope around and between my wrists before he knots it with a firm tug that sends something needy and vicious throbbing through my system.

This should be sending me into a full-blown panic attack as I relive every horrifying moment of that night eight years ago, sinking into the nightmare, drowning in anxiety and panic.

But I’m not.

I feel fucking *alive*.

I close my eyes, surrendering to the strange, thrilling rush as he tightens the last knot. My breathing is shallow, my pulse erratic, but I don’t fight it. Instead, I let the adrenaline wash over me, allow fear to mix with excitement until they’re one and the same.

He steps in front of me, his fingers lifting up my chin. “Look at me.” His voice is soft but commanding. I open my eyes and the intensity in his gaze, the dark, unyielding hunger, steals my breath.

Wordlessly, he gathers my hair in his hand as he slowly walks behind me. My pulse skips as his grip tightens and he starts to move his fingers. It takes me a second to realize he’s putting my hair into a single, long braid. Electricity pulses under my skin as he lets the braid drop between my shoulder blades and slowly moves in front of me.

He’s holding a blood-red silk scarf.

I’m half-expecting the panic that I’ve managed to hold back to finally escape in a mad frenzy when he starts to tie the silk over my eyes.

Instead, pure desire pools in my core, engulfing me like flames as he pulls the silk tight. His hand wraps around the braid running down my back, coiling it around his fist and pulling hard enough to drag a low whine from my throat.

“Open your mouth, Kitsune,” Damian growls quietly. “Show me what a good little cum slut you are.”

He pulls me down as the filthiness of his words hits me. Something swollen and slick runs over my lips, and my thighs squeeze together when I realize it’s his thick, hot, hard cock.

Fuck.

My lips part as he pushes between them with a low groan. He doesn’t ram inside, but he’s not gentle, either. There’s a commanding insistence to the way he guides his fat cock over my tongue, stretching my lips and jaw wide as I moan.

Damian hisses as his cock hits the back of my throat. I gag a little, but the pure adrenaline that explodes through me when he grips my hair tighter and rocks his hips against my mouth has me fighting to keep him there.

He rolls his hips back, sliding his slick, throbbing cock from my mouth. I moan when I feel the swollen head drag over my bottom lip before he roughly pushes right back inside.

My eyes roll back behind the silk, my body tingling and squirming as Damian starts to fuck my mouth.

“*Good girl*,” he groans, thrusting in and out slowly, letting the head almost pop out from between them before he guides it into the back of my throat again. “Such a pretty little mouth wrapped around my big fucking dick.”

I feel him lean over me and I flinch, moaning with my mouth full of his cock when his palm cracks across my bare ass. He does it to the other cheek, spanking me *hard*, sending fire chasing over my tender skin. I whine as I find myself swallowing his dick deeper, choking on him as moans tumble from my lips and spit drips down my chin.

His hand spanks my ass again before it slowly slides down between my thighs from behind. I whimper eagerly, arching my back as his fingers tease over my pussy, parting my lips. Then I moan loudly when he sinks two fingers into me, thrusting them in and out as he grabs my braid and starts to fuck my mouth even harder.

Lewd, wet *gluck* sounds fill the room as Damian fucks me from both ends, turning me into a puddle. My back arches, my body quivering as I thrust back and forth on his fingers and his cock.

Suddenly, his fingers slide out. With a low groan, he pulls his pulsing cock from my gasping, hungry mouth. His hand cups my jaw, and when his fingers trace my lips, I instantly know *which* hand it is.

“Taste how fucking messy your cunt gets for me, Kitsune,” he growls roughly in my veiled darkness. “Taste how fucking greedy your little hole is.”

I’m shaking as two slick fingers slip between my lips and push over my tongue, sinking deep into my mouth.

I taste *good*.

Damian keeps his fingers there, stroking my tongue as his thumb lifts my chin. Suddenly, I feel his lips on me, his mouth kissing the corner of mine. His tongue pushes in along with his fingers, dueling and dancing, tasting my slickness on my fingers alongside me, utterly invading my mouth.

My body clenches and coils, my thighs squeezing tight with an aching need for *more*.

Damian chuckles low as he pulls away. His fingers stroke my lips, then glide over my jaw, then my neck as he starts to walk behind me again.

“Such an *eager* little fuck toy,” he murmurs quietly, his voice venom and silk. “But all this squirming around is a problem.”

I tremble when his hand slides up the small of my back, teasing up my spine before pausing between my shoulder blades.

“Let’s do something about that.”

Damian suddenly shoves me forward, pushing my face into the cushion and loosening the rope around my wrists. The second they’re free, he grabs one and yanks that hand back, my arm pressing to the outside of my bent knee until my wrist is against my ankle.

Oh fuck…

My core tightens, adrenaline and need humming in my veins as he slowly and deliberately wraps the soft red rope around my ankle and wrist, binding them together. He pulls my other arm down to the other bent knee, binding those too.

The silky red rope coils and knots up my calves and my forearms. Pure lust courses through me like napalm as Damian deftly and sensually loops the rope around my thighs, my waist, cinching it at my hips and bringing a length of it up my spine.

I shudder when he loops it between and around my breasts, the soft rope wrapping around them tight against my skin, making my nipples ache and stiffen.

When I feel his fingertips tease down my hip and then slip away, I know he's done.

I can't move a muscle. But I'm trembling everywhere.

I gasp quietly as I feel his fingertips trace down the back of one of my thighs, then up to dance lightly over my ass, then down the other thigh. My body ripples and tingles as primal heat pools between my legs.

"I wish you could see yourself right now," Damian growls quietly, almost reverently. "Like a perfect little fuck doll, all bound and tied. So pretty."

He runs a finger across one of the ropes pressing into the skin of my thigh, making me tremble.

Suddenly, warm air teases over my bare pussy, making me gasp sharply. Then, without warning, I feel his tongue dragging up between my lips. I moan in pleasure, twisting and writhing against my bonds as Damian slowly, languidly, teases his tongue up and down my slit.

His lips wrap around my throbbing clit, sucking hard as his tongue curls around the aching bud. I cry out, choking out my pleasure as I strain at the ropes. It only makes them tighter.

More immobilizing.

Puts me more at his mercy.

Damian’s tongue drags back up and plunges inside of me. I moan into the cushion, shaking everywhere as he fucks me with his tongue. His large, strong hands splay out across my ass, spreading me wide open as he *devours* me.

I squeal when his tongue slips higher, circling my asshole as my eyes bulge behind the blindfold.

“*Damian*…”

The unfamiliar sensation throws me at first. But as the tip of his tongue swirls and dances over my most private place, the sensations become *way* too wild to ignore. My mouth goes slack, my body trembling as Damian spreads me open and pushes his tongue into my ass. His palm cracks down on my upturned butt, making me squeal and writhe as he licks, driving me insane.

He moves back to my clit, wrapping his lips tightly around it and sucking. I can feel my body shaking and trembling, my pulse skipping and throbbing as my mouth falls open in a silent scream.

Wild, explosive tension begins to build in my core. My moans and his savage growls fill the room and my ears as he devours my pussy. My thighs start to quiver, my breath coming in ragged, staccato gasps until suddenly, Damian swirls his tongue around my swollen clit, and it’s the final straw.

I scream into the cushion as my body convulses against the tight knots binding me. My arousal coats his tongue as I sob my release into the darkness, shaking all over as his tongue keeps dancing over my clit.

I’m still gasping for breath as he stands, a mess of moans and whimpers as he roughly grabs my braid and wraps it around his fist.

“I’m not done with you yet, Kitsune…”

He tugs sharply on my braid, sending bolts of electricity zipping through my scalp. I feel him move behind me, and my breath catches when I feel the sheer size of his swollen cock tease against my slick pussy.

“Are you on birth control, Kitsune?” Damian growls as he bends over me and tugs my head up by the braid wrapped around his fist.

My nipples are tight and electric against the cushioned bench beneath me, my knees shaking, my back sharply arched as his dick teases against my lips.

“N-no...” I choke out. “I—”

“*Good*.”

It feels like I’m getting split in half and his cock is suddenly in my fucking *throat* as Damian rams every inch of his thickness into me with one brutal stroke. I don’t even recognize the needy, submissive whine that comes from my mouth, my body spasming in the ropes.

Damian hisses through clenched teeth, staying deep inside, like he’s savoring the feeling of my walls clenching and rippling around his cock. My knees shake on the cushion as he rolls his hips, grinding himself deep.

“*Fuck me*,” he groans. “Your pretty little pussy is trying to strangle my cock, Kitsune,” he hisses darkly. “Such a fucking *greedy* little hole, so hungry for my big dick.”

My eyes roll back in my head, my jaw slack as he slowly withdraws, until just the swollen, bulging head is inside me. But the reprieve only lasts a second before he’s pushing right back in, cramming every inch of his huge cock into my tightness.

Another unrecognizable, guttural sound comes from my throat as he pulls back again before ramming in once more. My fingers claw at my ankles, muscles straining against the soft red rope cutting into my skin.

I cry out as Damian grabs the rope at the small of my arched back, using it like a handle. His hips roll as he starts to thrust into me harder and faster, yanking me back and making me take every fucking inch of him.

Embarrassingly lewd squelching sounds fill the room as Damian fucks me with brutal, powerful strokes. I’m so fucking wet I can feel it dripping down my thighs, and I’ve given up trying to stop the animal noises coming from my throat.

The harder he fucks me, the more the ropes dig into my skin.

The more at his mercy I become.

The closer I get to an orgasm that I know is going to be explosive, cathartic and raw.

Like nothing I've never felt before.

Damian groans, using his grip on the ropes and my hair to pull me onto his cock over and over, until it's *me* who's fucking *him*, a needy, horny little slut, taking every inch of him deep and still moaning for more.

"That's it, Kitsune," he grunts as his cock rams into me. "Bounce on my fucking dick. Show me what an obedient little cumslut my fiancée is. Show me how fucking desperate you are to come all over my cock."

The coiling sensation inside me tightens like the ropes around my body. It starts like a shaking, trembling feeling. My knees start to quiver, the small of my back tightening and arching desperately. My nipples drag electrically against the cushion, and my pussy clenches around his fat cock as I shove back onto it with reckless abandon.

Every stroke pushes me closer to the edge. Every thrust breaks down every barrier, every defense, until I'm nothing but raw, fiery lust.

"*Come for me, Kitsune*," his rough, rasping, velvety voice snarls into my ear before his lip bites down hard on the lobe. His grip tightens, ramming into me over and over as my world blurs at the edges. "That greedy little pussy is going to make me come so fucking hard," he grunts. "Make me come, Kitsune…" I cry out as he pounds into me, his teeth raking down my neck as he pins my cheek to the cushion. "Take every fucking drop of my cum like a good girl."

It's the timing of "good girl" as he sinks himself in me to the hilt that does it. The blur around the edges of my reality intensifies. My vision fades out as my body arches and strains against my ropes, spasming and shaking before suddenly, I *explode*.

I scream out my orgasm as it rips through me. The growing pain of the ropes cutting into me only makes the pleasure more intense. I'm shaking everywhere as Damian pounds into me, his abs hitting my ass, his heavy balls slapping against my clit before he buries himself deep and groans.

A moan shudders through my chest as his hot cum spills into me. His thick cock twitches and pulses, pumping his cum deep as he pulls my head up by my braid, twisting my face around before his mouth crashes to mine, kissing me like he's claiming me.

In that moment, my entire world is the unrelenting power of him, and the intoxicating thrill of my surrender.

We stay like that a minute, his cock still balls-deep inside me as he lazily kisses my mouth, his tongue tasting my lips as he toys with my hair. Then slowly, he breaks away, and I gasp quietly when he slides his length from between my legs.

As he starts to untie me, my adrenaline high begins to fade, replaced by a strange tension. When the last of the ropes slips from my bruised, still quivering body and he's removed the red silk from around my eyes, I sit up, wrapping my arms around myself as reality returns.

Two minutes ago, I was bound on my knees, moaning deliriously as he fucked me like an animal.

Suddenly, it's as if someone's turned the lights back on. I feel exposed and weirdly vulnerable being completely naked—not to mention the marks on my skin, my swollen lips, and the fact that I can feel his cum leaking out of me.

Damian seems completely unfazed by the fact that we're both nude. In fact, I'm beginning to think he might be even more at ease naked than clothed.

But I suddenly feel the need to cover. I turn, grabbing the throw blanket from the edge of the bed. Just as I start to pull it over, his hand shoots out, stopping me.

"Nope."

I frown as I turn to him. "What?"

"No," he repeats, his tone pleasant but firm as he shrugs. The control in his voice grates on me, and a sliver of defiance rises inside me.

"I'm just covering—"

“No. You’re not.”

I scowl, hugging my arms around myself. “Control freak,” I mutter. His expression doesn’t change, a hint of amusement flickering in his eyes. I huff, pushing myself off the bed and walking into the bathroom.

Inside, I flick on the light, wincing a little as my eyes adjust. My cheeks burn as I stare at myself in the mirror.

Jesus *Christ*. I look like…well, like I just had the shit fucked out of me. Which, granted, I *did*.

For a second, I allow myself to grin at reflection despite the blush on my face.

Whatever this probably unhealthy thing is with Damian, there’s zero question that I just had—bar none—the best sex of my life. Granted, I haven’t had *much* of it. After what happened with Josh that night in school, sex wasn’t exactly a high priority. But I did try eventually. It just never…I don’t know…felt like I thought it was supposed to. There were no “explosions” or “fireworks” or anything like that. It just felt—mechanical.

I guess that’s why I’ve tended to seek out relationships like the one I had with Scott, where sex wasn’t even on the table.

But now, for the first time, I think I understand the whole “fireworks and explosions” thing.

A *lot*.

I take in my disheveled reflection again: my hair half out of the braid Damian put it into. My skin crisscrossed with red marks and slightly bruised indentations from the ropes. My makeup trashed, my lips smudged and swollen.

His cum is still dripping down my thighs.

Hastily, I grab some tissues and clean up. I wash my face and brush my teeth, taking the braid out before I walk back into the bedroom.

It’s still dark, illuminated only by the neon of the Ginza district outside. Damian’s in bed with the covers pulled back in a clear invitation.

I hesitate awkwardly at the foot of the bed.

“Get in,” he says, in that familiar commanding tone.

“This isn’t *real*, Damian,” I say quietly, a reminder to myself as much as to him.

“I’m well aware our engagement isn’t real, Hana,” he grunts. It’s weirdly foreign to hear him use my name instead of Kitsune or princess. “But our *arrangement* is.”

My brow furrows. “Arrangement?”

His lips curl dangerously. “The one where I *own you* and you do as I say.”

I bristle. The commanding tone in bed—or on the bench, if we’re splitting hairs—is one thing. Bossiness outside of that—forbidding me to cover up, telling me where to sleep—feels too much.

Plus…and I have no interest in sharing this with him…

…I’ve never actually slept in a bed with anyone.

Ever.

Much like being pinned or held down, being in a bed with a man has always felt…not great. Triggering.

I shake my head. “I’m… I’ll just sleep on the couch.”

Damian’s gaze darkens. “*No*, you won’t,” he growls. He points to the bed next to him. “You’ll sleep here.”

“*Why*—”

“Because I said so,” he snaps. “Now get. In.”

His piercing violet gaze is unrelenting, and my resolve wavers under its intensity. I don’t want to surrender—I don’t want the gnawing sensation of climbing into a bed with him.

But telling him why I don’t want to feels dangerous. At the end of the day, despite everything we just did, there *is* an element of danger with Damian.

So I shudder as I quietly make my way to the other side of the bed and climb in.

“Happy?” I whisper, feeling a clawing sensation at the back of my neck, dragging me back to that night in school.

“Ecstatic,” Damian mutters. “Glad you remembered our arrangement.” He tosses and punches his pillow a few times before he settles and closes his eyes. “Night.”

“Night,” I mumble back, the pressure on my neck beginning to choke off my breath and the clawing feeling in my chest starting to slice away at me.

Somehow I stay where I am, sitting up in bed and counting to higher and higher numbers to distract myself—an exercise one shrink taught me years ago. By the time I hit four hundred, Damian is fast asleep next to me, his breathing deep and even.

I almost trip over myself jumping out of bed. Instantly it’s like I can breathe again, and the whining, gnawing sensation inside of me quiets.

I take a deep breath and head for the door. Then I spot something on the floor, and I stop.

It’s the ropes from earlier, now lying coiled and discarded.

I glance at the door, then back at Damian, sleeping.

Then at the ropes.

Then at Damian.

My lips curl devilishly.

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16

HANA

I'M GRINNING SMUGLY as I wait for the elevator. I scroll through my calendar on my phone, glancing at the day's agenda of meetings. Today is all about the legitimate side of things—a slew of acquisitions that will bring Mori Holdings' reach into Tokyo before Kenzo expands operations of the Mori-kai into the city.

So—business as usual, just the way I like it.

That's not the reason for my smug expression, though. That's all due to the memory of my escape last night.

It was a multi-step affair. First, I used the ropes Damian had just used on me to tie *him* to the hotel bed—carefully and quietly, without waking him. Then I grabbed some clothes and toiletries and headed to Kai's room.

It's not that I necessarily couldn't be around Damian. And the sex…I mean *fuck*.

That was good. *Really* good.

But it was the combination of his usual bossiness together with his demand that I climb into bed with him. My issues about being tied up go away with him, apparently. The sharing a bed ones don't.

Fuck you, past trauma. Fuck you, complexities of the psyche. Fuck you both very much.

The elevator dings open, and I step in to go meet Kai downstairs. I groan, making a note to be extra nice to him today. Not *just* because he gave me safe harbor from Hurricane Damian last night.

My mind flicks back to knocking on Kai's door, and to the startled, maybe even horrified look on his face when he opened it, clearly having been pulled away from… well, *something*.

I mean the man was shirtless, flushed, and disheveled.

He clearly wasn't exactly *alone*.

After stammering an apology, mortified, I'd started to back away. But he stopped me, his evident concern overriding any embarrassment on either side.

"Did he hurt you?" he'd growled, a protective edge entering his tone when he saw my bedraggled state.

I'd promised him it was nothing, that I was just looking for a little space away from Damian.

"Wait in the lobby," he'd said quietly. "Five minutes. I'll come get you."

Sure enough, he met me in the lobby mere minutes later and brought me back to his room, offering me the couch without another word. I spent the rest of the night curled up there, feeling guilty for cutting his evening with his lady friend short, but also smugly satisfied at having slipped away from Damian.

Two floors down, the elevator pauses as the doors open. I don't look up from my phone as someone steps in beside me. I hear them ask "going up or down?" in Japanese.

"Down," I murmur absently, focused on my calendar as the doors slide shut again.

Then a dangerous voice cuts through the silence. "How about we don't go *anywhere*?"

I freeze, my eyes snapping up. Damian stands in front of me, far too close, his gaze dark and intense.

Oh shit.

His hand slams out, jamming the emergency stop button, and the elevator jerks to a halt, trapping us. His hand wraps around my throat, pinning me against the wall as my eyes go wide.

“Well, well, *well*.” His voice is a taunting drawl, his eyes predatory. “There’s my fiancée.”

I swallow, managing to force a sneering grin to my face. “Managed to wriggle free, I see.”

Damian’s eyes turn a violent shade of purple. My breath catches as I stare up at him, heart racing with both defiance and apprehension. The fire of my earlier triumph starts to fade, but I refuse to let him see it.

Instead, I force myself to smirk, throwing attitude back at him. “What’s the matter, Damian? You don’t like the taste of your own medicine?”

He leans in closer, his grip firm. “*You* don’t seem to like playing by the rules.” His voice is a dangerous whisper as his fingers trail along my jaw, forcing me to meet his gaze.

“Not at all,” I choke out. “I just don’t like playing by *your* stupid rules.”

The space between us hums with tension, charged with an intensity as dangerous as a lit fuse. His hand tightens around my throat.

“You think this is a fucking game, Hana? Sneaking out right after we were *attacked*?” When he speaks again, his tone is volatile and unhinged. “Spending the night in fucking *Kai’s* room?” he hisses quietly with a throbbing intensity that sends fear rippling up my spine. “I *told you* what would happen if you insisted on flirting with that motherfucker—”

“Oh, my God, get *over* yourself!” I blurt, pushing his chest in an attempt to create distance.

Spoiler: it doesn’t work.

“Kai’s a *friend*, psycho!”

His gaze turns stony, his jaw grinding. “And I’m your damn fiancé.”

“*Fake* fiancé,” I shoot back, my cheeks flushing with irritation. “Let’s not pretend this is anything more than it is.”

Something in his expression shifts, a flicker of anger tempered by a dangerous intensity.

Suddenly, he’s kissing me.

Hard, and brutally.

He crushes his mouth to mine in a kiss that’s fierce, demanding, and leaves no room for argument. His hand slips around the back of my neck, pulling me closer, pouring every ounce of his anger and frustration into the kiss, igniting something raw within me.

I try to push him away, but it’s useless. His grip tightens, and instead of breaking free, I find myself surrendering to the force of it, melting against him. The tension I’d felt—the anger, the smug satisfaction—it all dissolves into a reckless, heady thrill that drowns out every logical thought.

His hand slides to my waist, pressing me harder to the wall, his body solid and unyielding, leaving me breathless. His kiss is an all-consuming, relentless storm and I’m caught in the eye of it, every ounce of control slipping from my grasp as he takes what he wants until I find myself wanting it, too.

I whimper as he shoves my skirt up and grabs my thigh, lifting it to his hip. My whimper escalates into a shriek as he lifts me off the floor and pins me against the wall, his mouth never leaving mine. My legs wrap around his muscled waist as he reaches between us and yanks his belt open. I moan as he hooks my panties with a finger, yanks them aside, and pushes the swollen head of his cock against my wet opening.

“If you’re under the impression that you’ll be going to a *single* fucking meeting, dinner, function, or anything else without my cum dripping out of at least one of your holes while we’re in Tokyo playing this game…”

He bites down hard on the lobe of my ear.

“Let this be my way of telling you *just* how sadly mistaken you are.”

He rams his swollen cock into me, forcing the air from my body and a cry from my lips. I moan, my arms winding around his neck and my fingers spearing his silvery hair as he starts to pound into me, wildly, recklessly.

Shit, he's *so* fucking big.

"You don't want to play the part of my fiancée?" he growls roughly into my neck before biting down on it and making me squeal, fucking me into the wall of the elevator. "Then you can play the part of my *whore*. We'll just tell everyone that you're here as my personal fuck toy."

I want to scream in his face that he can't talk to me like that. Call me things like that.

But unfortunately, when he *does*, much as I hate to admit it, it's one of the hottest things I've ever heard.

"*Squeeze* my fucking dick, princess," he groans, fucking into me hard and fast, the wet sounds of my pussy clinging to his cock filling the elevator. "Squeeze it like you're desperate for that cum to fill your tight little pussy up again. That's what you'll be, Kitsune. My little cum slut. My *concubine*."

His cock plunges into me over and over, driving me wild as he hits places inside me I've never felt before and grinds against my clit with every thrust. I cling to him for dear life, taking his cock over and over as he nails me against the wall of the elevator.

I bite down on my lip to stop from screaming as the orgasm begins to build inside me, not wanting him to know. As if coming is giving in, conceding this battle of wills.

Damian just chuckles as he leans down and bites my nipple through my blouse and bra. The sensation is electric, snapping my spine rigid as a cry erupts from my throat.

"Yes… Be a good little fuck toy and make a mess on my cock, Kitsune. Make a mess of me so I can make a fucking mess of you."

He bites down again on my nipple as he thrusts deep. It's too much. I cry out, my body wrenching and spasming as the orgasm detonates through me.

My thighs squeeze around his hips, my walls clenching and rippling around his swollen cock as I come all over him.

With a grunt, Damian grips my ass tightly and buries himself inside me. I whimper as I feel him pulse and jerk, his hot cum spilling into me as I cling to him.

Fuck.

When he pulls back, I'm gasping for air, my cheeks flushed, my heart pounding wildly. Slowly, Damian slips out, pulling my panties back into place with a smirk.

Instantly, I can feel his cum leaking into them.

How lovely.

I open my mouth to speak, but his gaze pins me in place. "Still feel fake?" he murmurs, his voice laced with dark satisfaction.

Damian pushes the emergency button, and the elevator begins to descend again as we both straighten ourselves up.

The doors slide open to the hotel lobby, where a frowning Kai shoots me a worried look and glares at Damian's back. I try to push past him, but Damian grabs my arm, sending a bolt of lightning sizzling through me as he leans down to my ear.

"Enjoy your meetings, Kitsune. When you're sitting there trying to make deals with my cum seeping out of your pussy and into your panties all morning, I want you to remember something."

Heat floods my face as my eyes dart to his. "*What*," I mutter quietly.

"You're *mine*."

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17

HANA

ANGER STILL SIMMERS under my skin as I stride out of the meeting, heels clicking on the marble floor.

That fucker Damian.

The man is everywhere, prowling into every corner of my mind like ink spreading across a page. An infuriating shadow I can't shake.

I glance back at the offices of Yuma Solutions, a financial analytics firm that I'd like to buy via Mori Holdings to expand our legitimate footprint in Tokyo.

The meeting went well; the team I'd be buying out and then working with were polite and very receptive to my initial offer. I should feel *proud*.

Instead, all I can think of is *that fucker*. All I was able to think about the whole meeting was him. How he infiltrates every thought, even when he's nowhere in sight.

How he fucks me and makes me scream when he's very much *in* sight.

I have to put some space between us. Yes, the sex is *outrageously* good. Psychopathic narcissist or not, the man certainly knows every single way to make my breath hitch, my toes curl, and my body come apart for him.

But we're blurring lines. The whole point of this charade is so Miyamoto can sell us to the patriarchal, old-school leaders of lesser Yakuza families that report to him. It's clear to me now, especially after having dinner with

him, that Miyamoto *himself* doesn't give a shit if I'm "spoken for" or not. But he understands that Yakuza culture, in Tokyo especially, *will* give a shit. Several shits, actually.

Damian and I pretending that we're engaged is one thing. Us hopping into bed together—okay, a padded bench and the wall of an elevator—is another. Entirely.

It *has to stop*. No matter how mind-blowingly good it is.

I shove open the glass doors to the street and step out, frustration billowing behind me like smoke. The second I get outside I stop abruptly, and an incredulous smile splits my face, instantly breaking my foul mood.

Takeshi grins back, leaning against a sleek, matte-finish dark red Yamaha with black and gold accents.

"Tak!" I shriek, bolting toward him. He chuckles as I throw my arms around him, hugging him fiercely.

"What are you doing here?" I blurt, pulling back to look him over, searching for any sign of trouble. He just shrugs nonchalantly, like he's here on vacation.

"Just making sure everything's going smoothly."

I scowl, arching a brow at him. "You honestly think I need checking on?"

He grins. "Nah. That's not really why I'm here. I may or may not have some…*other* business to deal with," he shrugs.

"Would this be part of whatever you and Mal were whispering about involving Kolya Ishida?"

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about," Tak says, grinning innocently. "But I will say that I'm *also* here because I don't trust that psychopath you're fake engaged to. Not one fucking bit."

I laugh mirthlessly. "Yeah, well, fuck him."

Takeshi's frown deepens. "Trouble in paradise?"

I smile. "Nah, everything's fine."

“Hana…” His jaw tightens, ever the protective brother. “Is he…trying anything with you?”

Trying. Succeeding. Repeatedly.

I shake my head, patting his chest. “Tak, I’m not a kid anymore. I can handle myself. Even around psychos like Damian.”

He doesn’t exactly look convinced. But before he can prod, I clear my throat.

“So—where are you staying here?”

He grins. “Right down the hall from you at the Conrad. I snagged the other suite. Charged it to Mori Holdings.”

I roll my eyes. “You are *such* a dick.”

He chuckles, tossing me his spare helmet. “Hop on. I’ll give you a ride. There’s another surprise waiting for you, too.”

* * *

As soon as Takeshi opens the door to his suite I shriek, laughter bubbling out the second I spot her. Annika screams back, running over and pulling me into a bear hug.

Okay, Tak, best surprise ever.

Over takeout dinner, Anni fills me in. Kenzo had to head to Osaka for a ton of meetings, so she decided to come here to make sure Tak didn’t get into too much trouble in Tokyo.

“And obviously to see you. I miss your face around the house.”

I grin. “Freya not doing it for you?”

She rolls her eyes. “I never fucking see her! I mean, I can match her nocturnal schedule if need be. But she and Mal never leave his damn guest house. I mean, what are they doing in there?”

“Well, Annika,” Takeshi sighs. “When a boy and girl love each other very much, and they want to express those feelings in a physical—”

He laughs, dodging the half-eaten gyoza that Annika chucks at him.

As the conversation—and the wine—flows, I can’t help but grin. I needed this. I’ve only been away from Kyoto for two days, but still.

Just as Takeshi starts to get to the best part of a seriously hilarious story involving a street race, my phone dings, pulling me out of the conversation. I glance down, and whatever grin I had on my face sours.

DAMIAN

Where the hell are you?

I ignore the irritation that knots in my stomach as I reply.

ME

Charming, as always. I’m busy. Leave me alone.

DAMIAN

Funny, you have a way of saying that and then ending up bouncing on my dick not long after.

Heat rises to my face, my pulse quickening despite myself.

HANA

Stop talking to me like that.

DAMIAN

Why?

HANA

It’s gross, and rude.

DAMIAN

If it’s so gross, then how come it gets you so wet?

My fingers hesitate over the keys, pulse hammering, before I reply.

HANA

It doesn’t. I promise you that.

DAMIAN

Prove it. Put your phone under that business skirt of yours and take a photo.

I clench my jaw, forcing back a grin as I type.

HANA

I'm not sending you a picture of my panties.

DAMIAN

Then get your ass back here and show me in person.

"What's got you smiling like that?" Annika laughs, and I realize too late my face has betrayed me.

"Nothing," I mutter, trying to keep my expression neutral.

Another text from Damian dings, and I can almost hear his tone turning darker.

DAMIAN

Seriously though, lest I have to remind you of our arrangement, where are you and why aren't you here to take care of this?

The next message is a photo. Of him. Or, at least, a very swollen, veined, thick, and…fuck me, mouthwatering…part of him.

My eyes bulge as the high-def photo of Damian's *giant* cock fills my screen. I quickly swipe away from the image.

HANA

You're a lunatic.

DAMIAN

Where. Are. You. I'm not joking. If you're in that fucker Kai's room again, he's going to have to learn to sign his name with his goddamn toes.

I roll my eyes.

HANA

I'm down the hall.

DAMIAN

What?

HANA

Tak just arrived. I'm with him and Anni in his suite down the hall.

Damian doesn't reply immediately, but Annika's phone dings with a text.

"Shit," she giggles, glancing down. "I totally forget to tell Damian I was coming to town." She types away, then looks up at me. "How's that whole charade going?"

"Just great…" I say dryly.

My phone dings with a new text from Damian.

DAMIAN

Interesting.

HANA

Believe me now, dickhead?

DAMIAN

Calling me names gets me harder.

I huff, my fingers tapping a quick, defiant reply.

HANA

I'm staying here tonight. Maybe you can find someone else to tie up.

DAMIAN

Appearances MATTER, Hana.

HANA

Last I checked, Miyamoto and the rest of the oyabuns aren't camping out in our suite to make sure we share a bed every night. I'll be staying here for the foreseeable future. Have fun with your ropes, psycho.

I drop the phone onto the table, satisfied. My triumph doesn't last. A few minutes later there's a call from the front desk, telling me there's a package for me. Tak offers, but I shake my head.

I'm *sure* it's Damian. It's probably a "package" of images of his dick, or something worse.

I head downstairs, waving to four Mori-kai guards I recognize on duty in the lobby. I collect the padded manila envelope from the concierge and then

step back into the elevator to go upstairs.

I tear open the envelope as soon as the doors close, expecting a pile of dick pics. My brow knits when I reach inside and pull out an iPad, a post-it note stuck to it that reads "*Play Me*."

Confusion and apprehension coil in my stomach, but I can't stop myself. I power on the iPad and press play on the only thing on the home screen: a video with a black thumbnail.

Instantly, the air goes cold.

My whole body stiffens, and it feels like razors are being dragged across my skin.

There, on the screen, is *me*.

I'm eighteen years old, struggling as Josh laughs and ties my arms to the bedposts in the guest room at that party I never should have gone to. I see myself scream into the T-shirt stuffed into my mouth, see the tears streaming down my face, hear the jeering of his buddies in the background.

Josh gets into position between my legs, which are also bound to the bedposts. My whole reality glitches and whines as I watch him trying to do it.

Trying to stick it in me.

He can't. I'll never forget that he couldn't do it.

The video cuts abruptly, and a still photo appears on the screen. It's Josh's senior yearbook picture, captured in that stupid suit, face smug, the banner behind him proudly saying *Harvard*.

He was going to go to Harvard, just like his father.

The screen shifts again, white text against a black background, and when my eyes sweep over it, my blood runs cold.

I know what you did, Hana. And you're going to pay for it.

The elevator doors slide open, but I can't move. I press a shaking palm to my mouth, fighting down the panic clawing up my throat. I back into the

corner of the elevator, sinking to the floor as my world spins and the demons from the past claw up to pull me under.

It all rushes back. Every scream. Every scar. Every moment I thought I'd buried.

Whoever sent this—*they know*.

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18

DAMIAN

IN THE EMPTY HOTEL SUITE, I glare down at my phone, tapping my fingers on the table, growling.

I'm *pissed the fuck off*.

Not just because Hana's not bending to my wishes. Not just because I want her here so I can fuck her until she's begging for my cock and coming all over it—though of course I do.

I dislike that she's *not with me*. End of story.

Which is confusing.

This whole thing is supposed to be fun, a twisted game for me. She's supposed to be a new plaything. Not someone I actually *want* to spend time with, unless my dick is in one of her holes.

Speaking of my dick…

I look down at my fully erect, rock-hard cock, which, it seems, shares my frustration. I could take care of this myself—pretend it's her under me, above me, wherever I want her. Or… I *have* been to Tokyo before on business. I could call one of my old "acquaintances" to come over. Usually, that would be fine.

But as soon as the thought crosses my mind, it's like I've stuck my dick in a freezer. I scowl as I glance down, watching my erection fade.

Fuck.

He doesn't just need release. He seems to need release *from her*.

Hana.

Her lips. Her skin. Her back arching as she pushes back, her tight little cunt swallowing my cock as she moans for more.

My erection instantly surges back to full-mast.

Goddammit.

Get your mind off her. *You're the one in control.*

Except—I'm not. She's got the wheel, and I very much need to rectify that.

I tuck my dick away and head out the door, marching down to Takeshi's room to drag Hana back here. The mere idea that she thinks she can dodge me like this makes my blood boil.

As I pass the elevators, though, I notice one of the doors is open.

I stop cold, my pulse spiking when I see her.

Hana is huddled on the floor in the back corner of the elevator, staring into space with her knees drawn up to her chest, an iPad lying beside her.

"Hana…" I growl quietly, moving closer. The moment I step inside her head jerks up, eyes wide and frantic.

"Don't touch me!" she screams, her voice choked. She thrashes as if she's somewhere else entirely, lost in a nightmare, an invisible phantom attacking her.

"Hana!" I bark, more firmly this time. I grab her arms, shaking her. "It's *me*."

Her breathing becomes less ragged. Her eyes search mine, flickering with recognition. She looks down at the iPad, all the color draining from her face before she glances back up at me.

"Damian…"

* * *

WHITE-HOT FURY CASCADES through me as I hit the pause button and then rewind the fucking video back to the beginning.

I'm sitting alone on the couch in the living room area of the suite, cloaked in hatred and rage. Hana is back in the bedroom where I carried her from the elevator: no longer fighting phantoms, but wrapped tightly in a duvet with the shades down.

She never told me I could watch this filth. Then again, she never told me I *couldn't.* So I did, because clearly this was what had her huddled and fighting ghosts in that elevator.

I've been angry before. I've felt rage, and hate, and fury.

But right now, the blackness inside me is at a whole new level.

I hit play once again, feeling my stomach drop and my blood turn to ice-cold razors. On the screen, a young Hana is screaming and thrashing as a smug motherfucker pins her on a bed. He's binding her wrists to the bedposts, snickering in a way that makes me want to smash the fucking iPad as he paws at her breasts through her dress.

"*Gonna finally get my dick wet!*" he crows gleefully as Hana sobs and cries, begging for him to stop.

Off camera, two other boys join in, encouraging the little fuck. Hana screams again, over and over, before a t-shirt gets tossed to the asshole on screen. He laughs as he catches it and stuffs it into Hana's mouth.

"You bitches better be ready to pay up after this!" he yells, securing Hana's ankles to the bed posts as he moves behind her.

"Bro, this is *so cheating*!" one of the fucks off camera laughs.

The shithead assaulting her snickers. "Just playing to win, bro!"

I've already watched the next part with pure hatred in my veins—where the motherfucker gets behind her, shoving her dress up and trying to stick his dick into her. Except from his frustrated expression, and the way he's

jerking his dick, and the jeers from his buddies, it's clear he's having… issues.

The little piece of shit can't get it up.

Hana's still screaming and crying as he tries again. Finally, he backs away with a sneer on his face, tucking a shrimpy little dick back into his pants before he kicks the side of the bed.

"Guess my dick is racist," he spits, which makes his buddies crack up.

There's one more shot of her terrorized, broken face before the video goes dark. Then it switches to some pathetic all-American glamor shot of the motherfucker who was just trying to rape her, with a banner saying "Harvard" behind him.

Then it cuts to a black screen with the message: "I know what you did, Hana. And you're going to pay for it."

When I'm done watching again, the violent, thundering urge to hunt and destroy is overtaking every logical thought in my mind. This isn't anger. It's colder, sharper—rage so intense it sears.

I shut the iPad off, breathing deep.

"I was eighteen."

Her voice is barely audible, and I turn to see her standing there, wrapped in the duvet, her face pale but filled with quiet strength.

"His name was Josh Donahue. He was my boyfriend back when I was still at school in England. He was American, and his family was rich, powerful, and influential—his dad was a US senator and his mom was a fucking *judge*, for God's sake."

My jaw grinds.

"I…" She looks away, her throat bobbing. "We went out for a little while. But he was pushing for us to sleep together. I hadn't done that yet, but he was…insistent." Her face is blank as she nods her chin at the screen. "That night, we'd gone to a party. He kept trying to get me to drink, but I refused. Eventually he got me into that room and got pushy. I said no and then…"

She looks away again. Her voice is flat, her gaze distant.

“I didn’t really know what was happening until he had one of my wrists tied. I thought it was a shitty joke until his two fucking friends jumped into the room, and I realized what it really was.” Hana’s mouth twists. “I wasn’t his girlfriend. I was a bet. They’d *bet* to see if he could fuck me before graduation.”

The rage inside of me increases to liquid fire. I can feel my hands clench as if around Josh’s fucking windpipe, ready to crush it.

“For whatever reason—maybe he was drunk, or it was the audience—he couldn’t get it up,” Hana says tightly. “He tried, but he couldn’t even…you know. Get it to go in. So he left me there, tied up, and they went to get more drinks.”

Every muscle in my body tenses with the burning need to rip someone apart.

“And then?” I growl quietly, my voice barely controlled.

She shakes her head. “It’s done, Damian. Leave it.”

I stand and take a step toward her. “No. I want to know if that little prick got any taste of justice.”

She hesitates, her jaw working. “He’s dead,” she finally says. “He died.”

I catch the shadow that flickers over her face. “The video,” I say quietly. “It says they know what *you* did.”

She swallows, looking away. “I didn’t do anything.”

And then it clicks.

“Takeshi,” I growl.

Her head snaps toward me, eyes widening slightly before they dart away again.

“Your *brother* did something,” I say quietly.

She nods, shoulders slumping slightly as the truth finally tumbles out.

“He was at home after I got loose and managed to drive myself back. I tried to hide it, but…” She grimaces. “It was pretty obvious. I’ve never been able to hide much of anything from him.” She shrugs, a wry smile on her face. “Twin shit, right?”

“What happened,” I murmur.

“I begged him not to,” she says, her voice cracking. “I was afraid he’d throw his life away trying to ‘avenge me’ or whatever. But he left, and when he came back, it was…done.”

My voice is low, dangerous. “How?”

Her face hardens, anger flashing in her eyes. “He made it look like Josh drunk-drove his Porsche off a cliff,” she murmurs coldly. “The whole school mourned our favorite golden boy shithead…and then life went on.”

I glance at the iPad, rage still pulsing in my veins. “Who else knew what happened?” I ask.

“N-no one,” she says quietly, but there’s a note of uncertainty there, and we both look at the iPad, a silent threat hanging in the air between us.

“That’s why I don’t like being pinned down or tied,” she finally says. “I mean, I don’t even like cramped spaces where I feel immobilized. After that night… I just couldn’t.”

I look up at her, hating that her mind is drifting somewhere I can’t follow.

Her eyes shift to mine, and she shrugs. “When you do it, though, it’s… fine.”

“*Fine*?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

A hint of a blush rises to her cheeks. “I like it,” she blurts. “When it’s you… I don’t go back to that place. It’s like it actually sets me free from it.”

Her raw, vulnerable expression tugs at something deep inside me that I’m not sure I want to acknowledge.

“When I didn’t want to sleep in a bed with you…” She trails off, glancing down. “It’s just that… I never have. I’ve never shared a bed with anyone.

Not since that night.”

The exhaustion on her face is palpable as she tries to hide a yawn.

“You should get some sleep,” I murmur.

She nods, glancing back toward the bedroom, then hesitating.

“I’ll sleep out here,” I add quietly.

Her mouth curls slightly at the corners. Relief flickers over her face as she looks at me with faint gratitude in her eyes as she wraps the duvet around herself like a shield.

“Thank you,” she whispers, looking down. “For listening to what I just told you…and not looking at me now like I’m broken or disgusting.”

I just nod, watching as she retreats into the bedroom, leaving the door open a crack. My thoughts are still filled with black rage and a possessive sort of fury.

Josh might be dead. But there were two other fuckers in that room that night—who not only did nothing, but laughed as she screamed.

She didn’t mention *them* being dead…

When I finally pull myself from my blood-soaked fantasies involving a flaying knife, it’s been half an hour. I stand and walk to the bedroom door, peeking in to make sure she’s okay.

Hana is sleeping soundly, wrapped in her duvet. Her sleeping face is unburdened. There’s no sign of nightmares playing under her eyelids.

Still, I watch her for another half an hour: watch her sleep, and dream.

And for once, the silence is enough.

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19

HANA

I STEP out of the car, the cool Tokyo night wrapping around me. Damian's already here, leaning against a black SUV, and his eyes snap to me the second he sees me. I catch his gaze, and a spark of electricity shoots through me, like a dangerous, silent current.

"Hey," I say, clearing my throat.

He tilts his head, smirking slightly. "Hey yourself."

The fundraising gala we're attending is for a local planning and zoning minister who both the Mori-kai and the Nikolayev Bratva plan on speaking with…okay, *bribing*…for easement on future construction projects in Tokyo. Damian and I opted to arrive separately and meet outside, as we've both been in a barrage of different meetings all day.

A strange sort of shyness settles between us. I'm not used to this uncertainty. Damian usually fills the entire space with his sheer presence, but right now, he's giving me a look that's softer, gentler, almost intimate.

"How were your meetings?" I ask, trying to fill the silence. "Good?"

He nods. "All good."

His eyes trace unabashedly over me, drinking in the black Dior gown with the silvery sequin accents and trim, the daring—thought not *nearly* as daring as on the dress I wore to Miyamoto's house—neckline and plunging back letting the cool air tease over my skin.

“You look fucking amazing,” he murmurs, a dark edge to his tone as his gaze slides over me again.

I blush. “Thanks, you too.” I hesitate, glancing down and pricking my fingers together before lifting my gaze back to him. “Thanks for last night,” I shrug, feeling the weight of the unspoken words. “For listening to my whole sob story. I mean, I’d prefer—”

“No one’s going to hear it from me,” he growls. “If that’s your concern.”

“Thanks,” I smile. “Really.”

His eyes hold mine for a beat. “Anytime,” he says, his voice low. He nods up at the ballet theater where the gala event is being hosted in the upstairs foyer. “You a fan?”

“Of the ballet?” I lift a shoulder. “A little, I guess.”

“If we’re ever in New York together, remind me to take you to the Zakharova Ballet. Kir’s a generous patron.”

He holds his arm out. “Shall we?”

“Gotta make the people happy, I guess,” I grin.

We’re starting to head inside, arm-in-arm, when I clear my throat.

“I got your gift, by the way.”

This morning, I woke up alone in his bed. Or, I guess it’s *our* bed, I just haven’t been using it aside from last night. He was already off to early meetings. But when I rolled over, I found myself smiling at a little origami crane—tied in red yarn, of course—sitting on the pillow next to me.

Damian shrugs nonchalantly. “Well, they were fresh out of fingers today. So…”

I giggle, a strange thrill spreading through me, heat creeping up my neck. We walk into the gala side by side, an odd, easy silence hanging between us.

The upper foyer is tastefully opulent: chandeliers dripping with crystals, dark wood paneled walls gleaming under soft light. The crowd is a mix of

politicians, businessmen, and Yakuza bosses, mingling together like they're all part of the same twisted, corrupt club.

Probably because *they are*.

Before I can blink, Annika's at my side, tugging me away from Damian. Takeshi couldn't come tonight, but Annika was adamant about joining, and brought Kai as her date.

She grins, waving a drink in my face. "There you are! Thought you might still be avoiding me after ditching us last night."

I roll my eyes, laughing. "I already told you, I crashed *hard*."

When I never made it back to Takeshi's suite last night, I texted them that I had to work out some quick business stuff with Damian. But then I never came back, so…

Be honest," Anni says with a sigh. "Was D being a dickhead?"

"Nah" I say slowly, thinking back to the previous night. "He was…actually really great."

Annika raises an eyebrow, intrigued. "*Great*?"

I swallow. It's strange: what I shared about myself with him last night is something *no one* knows about.

Not even Kenzo or Mal.

Only Takeshi—and now Damian. It's unsettling, but there's a sort of calmness in it too.

"Yeah," I say. "He helped me with some business stuff we had to go over. So—" I blurt, worried she'll see through the lie, eager to change the subject. "Do we know where Takeshi is tonight?"

She shrugs. "Not sure. He's got this whole clandestine plan involving the Ishida-kai, so he's off doing…that. Something to do with Kolya Ishida's heir, maybe?"

Kolya's name alone sends a chill through me, but that's not why I'm frowning.

“I didn’t think he had children,” I murmur.

Annika glances around, her voice dropping. “That’s the thing: *no one’s sure*. Some say his daughter died years ago. Others claim she’s been spotted recently.”

“Seriously?”

She looks around again. “No idea, but apparently it’s *the* hot topic of gossip in the Yakuza circles of Tokyo these days.”

Before I can ask more, Annika’s attention shifts as someone nearby calls her name.

She groans as she glances at a well-dressed women eagerly waving at her. “Shit. Her husband knows Kenzo. I should probably go be charming. Catch you later.”

I give her a quick hug before she darts off. Then I turn toward the bar, needing a drink to steady myself, my head still swimming from all the truths that came out last night.

“Hana?”

The voice is familiar, hesitant. I look up, eyes widening in surprise when I realize who it is.

“*Scott*?”

He looks just as shocked to see me as I am to see him.

“Wow, Hana…” He smiles awkwardly. “You look fantastic.”

I give him a quick hug before I pull back, looking at him curiously. “What are you doing in Tokyo?”

He adjusts his tie. “I, uh, just got a new job with a financial firm here. Edo Analytics?”

My brows shoot up. “Wow, I actually have a meeting with them next week.”

“Oh?”

I nod. “Yeah, Mori Holdings is expanding into Tokyo. That’s why I’m here. We might be using Edo, actually.”

He smiles. “Well, I’m the brand-new vice president of internal investments. I’ll tell them they’d be idiots not to partner with you.”

I grin. “I’d appreciate that.”

He looks down, still clearly uncomfortable. “I…heard you got engaged?” It almost sounds like he’s afraid of my answer.

I feel a brief flicker of guilt. Part of me wants to tell him it’s all fake, a show. But, for one, I *really* can’t say that, especially not here in a room full of people who need to think Damian and I are everything we’re claiming to be. But also…*is* it fake at this point?

“I am, yeah,” I say.

Scott nods, clearing his throat and forcing a smile. “Well… I’m happy for you, Hana. Really.” He pauses, then adds, “Oh, I almost forgot! I’m working with someone who knows you—”

Before he can finish, I smell citrus and bergamot and feel a strong arm slide around my waist, pulling me close. I don’t even have to look to know who it is. Damian’s fingers press possessively into my hip, staking a silent claim that sends a jolt through me.

“Who the *fuck* are you?” Damian growls, radiating tension, his voice a low, dangerous rumble that cuts through the air. His eyes fix on Scott murderously. “And why the fuck are you talking to her?”

I sigh, exasperated. “Damian,” I mutter under my breath, but he’s not listening. His stare drills into Scott, unblinking and furious.

Scott shifts uncomfortably, glancing at me before meeting Damian’s glare. “I’m Scott Hiroyuki,” he says, trying to keep his tone polite. “Friend of Hana’s.”

Damian’s jaw tightens, unimpressed. “Friend?” He spits the word like it’s poison.

“Scott and I dated,” I blurt.

The admission makes Damian's face darken further. His arm tightens around my waist, pulling me even closer, a gesture that isn't lost on Scott *or* me.

"Right," Scott says with a nervous smile, glancing between us. "Well, it was, uh…nice to meet you." He hesitates, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. "Looking forward to seeing you at the office next week, Hana."

Damian's response is instant. "Get lost."

Scott gives me an awkward nod, clearly taken aback by Damian's blunt dismissal, and mumbles goodbye before quickly walking away.

The second he's out of earshot I whirl around, glaring at Damian. "What the *fuck* was that?" I hiss, trying to escape his arm.

Damian doesn't budge. "*That*," he growls quietly, "was me getting rid of some loser who thought he could just stroll back into your life." His eyes turn icy. "What the fuck did he mean about seeing you next week?"

"He works for an analytics firm Mori Holdings is considering using here in Tokyo," I snap, my voice tight. "If we *do* end up using them, then what? You going to stroll into his office and shoot him in head?"

"I was thinking more throwing him through his office window and counting the seconds before he becomes sidewalk goo. But your way admittedly sounds more efficient."

I roll my eyes. "You're not well."

"And *you're* not working with a man you used to fuck," he growls through clenched teeth.

"It's none of your damn business," I retort.

"Oh, it definitely is," he snaps, the dark possessiveness in his voice sending an unwelcome thrill through me.

I glare at him. "It's *not*, actually. And for the record, I never slept with Scott."

Damian scowls. “What?”

I feel a flush creeping up my cheeks, annoyance flaring. “I never…I just… I don’t really sleep with people.”

Confusion darkens his features. “You never slept with a guy you called your ex-boyfriend.”

“No,” I say testily.

“*Why*.”

“Because I just didn’t *want* to, okay?!” I snap. “Don’t get so fucking alpha about it. Also, why do you even care if I slept with him? This isn’t *real*, Damian,” I whisper, the frustration bubbling up inside me.

His hand tightens around my arm, pulling me closer, the intensity of his gaze burning into me. “Maybe I’m method acting,” he growls darkly, his voice rough. “Or maybe I just don’t like the thought of anyone else touching what’s mine.”

I lean in, my voice a harsh whisper. “*I’m not yours*.”

“Debatable,” he mutters, eyes blazing.

I pull away, my frustration boiling over. “Not. Really,” I say through clenched teeth, then storm away before he can say anything else.

I keep my distance from him, working the crowd as much as possible. But less than an hour later, the gala’s quickly losing its charm. Too much conversation, too much pretending, too much forced smiling. I need air.

I slip out of the foyer and into a quieter hallway. The windows here are open onto a government park outside, letting in a breeze that’s cool and refreshing, washing away some of the tension. I lean against the windowsill, staring out at the park and the city beyond, finally feeling able to breathe.

“Of all the gin joints, huh?”

I freeze, the words snapping my spine rigid. My entire body stiffens, like a rope suddenly pulled tight.

Slowly, I turn around and come face to face with a ghost from my past.

The monster from that night all those years ago, Josh, is dead. But his two best friends, Prescott Harding and Edward Radcliff—both American like him—were also in the room that night.

Laughing at my screams. Jeering. Cheering their friend on.

It's Prescott who stands before me now, smiling like we're old friends.

Like he *didn't* howl with laughter as I screamed for mercy while his buddy was trying to rape me.

"You look good, Hana," he says casually.

I can't speak. Almost can't breathe. He was there that night and did nothing. He watched, laughed, egged Josh on as—

"What are you doing here?" I finally whisper, my insides twisting with fear I thought I'd buried long ago.

Prescott chuckles easily. "Just working," he shrugs. "I'm with Edo Analytics now—actually, I just started working with an old friend of yours. Scott Hiroyuki?"

All I can do is nod, any words I might utter sticking in my throat.

"Small world, bumping into you here, isn't it?" He smiles the charming grin I remember, the one that used to fool everyone into thinking he was harmless.

I can't move, my head swimming. He's talking to me like we're just old classmates, like he didn't sit there and *laugh* as I was held down, as I screamed—

"Between you and me," he says, leaning in and lowering his voice, "I'm staying in Japan for a while. You know, with all those deposition summons going on with the Donahues."

My stomach twists violently. "Deposition summons?" I echo faintly, barely holding it together.

Prescott raises an eyebrow. “They didn’t contact you?” He groans. “Josh’s parents are on the warpath. They claim they’ve got evidence it wasn’t a drunk driving accident.” He shrugs. “I guess they’re looking for someone to blame.”

I shake my head, feeling like the ground’s slipping out from under me, staring at him with a floaty sort of disbelief as he glances at his watch.

“Shit, I have to run. Video call with my new boss.” He grimaces. “Fuckin’ Japanese have zero concept of work-life balance, am I right?” He grins at me. “Great seeing you, Hana.”

He starts to turn but then frowns, stopping and glancing back at me with a look that chills me to the bone. “Look… I just have to say it. What happened back then… We were all just stupid kids, right? And you were totally in on it, yeah?”

I stare at him, my mind whirling, barely able to process what he’s saying. “Excuse me?”

“Josh told us later that was your…thing.” He winks. “You know. Having an audience, being assaulted. A rape kink.”

I feel sick, my vision blurring at the edges as his smile only grows wider and more nauseating. “Too bad he had whiskey-dick that night, huh?”

My reality shatters, fragments splintering and my breath catching, shallow and sharp. My fingers dig into the window-ledge behind me to ground myself as the old memories claw up from the depths.

“Since we’re both here in Tokyo, we should get a drink sometime. Catch up.”

My voice briefly fails me, but then it calls out unbidden as he turns.

"What were you saying about the Donahues and deposition summons?"

Prescott rolls his eyes. "Who knows. I just heard a rumor they're trying to claim it was foul play, not that asshole driving around loaded." he chuckles. "But, I mean, come on. It's not like anyone *killed* him or anything."

My face goes numb. Prescott smiles.

“Good seeing you, Hana. Let's catch up soon. Really."

And with that, he’s gone, strolling down the hall as if he hadn’t just ripped open old wounds, pouring salt and acid into each one.

I stumble back, my vision blurring. I feel sick. Shattered. I can’t breathe.

And then, when I whirl away, I slam into a firm chest, instantly gasping as a hand shoots out and wraps around my throat, lifting my chin until my eyes lock with Damian’s.

“Who the *fuck* was that?”

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20

DAMIAN

I PACE the perimeter of the gala, drink in hand, jaw clenched so tight I can almost feel the enamel chipping.

The ice in my glass rattles. Every second since Hana left feels like another drop of gasoline on a spark that threatens to consume everything in its path.

Part of me *very* begrudgingly wants to admit that maybe I overreacted earlier.

The other part of me thinks that Scott is lucky to have walked away with his fucking jaw intact.

Yes, I feel a slight smugness knowing he never had her—never fucked her or touched her the way I have. But still.

I don't like the fact that he fucking *hugged* her.

The problem, as I'm discovering, is that when it comes to Hana, it's impossible to rein in my crazy. It won't be—can't be—leashed or caged around her.

"Hey, so…"

I turn to find Annika standing there, smirking and tilting her head as she gives me that half-mocking, half-affectionate look only she can pull off.

"Want to tell me why Hana *really* spent the night in your suite last night?"

I roll my eyes. "We're playing a role, Anni."

She studies me keenly. “How about I just ask: are you sleeping with her?”

I frown, simultaneously irritated and amused. “It’s not the salacious story you apparently want it to be,” I reply dryly as I turn back to the crowd, looking for Hana.

“Total non-answer,” Annika points out.

“Why do you care if it was?” I toss back, my tone unexpectedly sharp.

She looks at me for a moment, choosing her words carefully. “First, I want to be clear: I love you. You’re the brother I never had.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.”

She sighs, her expression softening. “That said… Hana is a good friend.”

“You’re worried that I’m going to drink her fucking blood or something sinister.”

Annika rolls her eyes. “I mean, I’m not thinking you’ll go full Hannibal Lecter…”

“But you’re still worried about her.”

“I’m worried about you *both*.” She sighs quietly. “Look, I know you don’t do relationships—”

“Says who?” I challenge, raising an eyebrow.

She rolls her eyes. “*Do* you?”

“No,” I answer flatly, earning a smile.

She touches my arm, her gaze soft and steady. “I know what you have with Freya and me is rare. I know you don’t do intimacy.”

She’s not wrong. After my parents died, the part of me that might have welcomed that kind of closeness just…shut down. It’s a defense mechanism that’s become second nature. The problem is, Hana seems to be prying open a door I thought was deadbolted.

Annika studies me, and I suddenly get the strange feeling that she understands something I don't even understand about myself. I might not know exactly what Hana means to me, but I do know she means *something*.

A big something. Something more than I ever expected anyone to mean.

I'm about to open my mouth despite not knowing how to answer Annika when a hand lands on my shoulder.

"Apologies, Annika-san," Miyamoto says, bowing slightly. "I'm afraid I must borrow Mr. Nikolayev for a moment."

"Don't go thinking for a second that we're done with this conversation," she sighs, shaking her head.

"Sure looks like we are," I grin as Miyamoto gently tugs me away. My smirk fades the moment I'm led into a tight circle of Yakuza men, all watching me with both caution and interest.

"Gentlemen," Miyamoto says expansively, draping an arm around my shoulder like we're old friends, "allow me to introduce you to my…how best to put it…*formidable ally*, Damian Nikolayev. This man," he grins, squeezing my shoulder harder, "is someone you want in your corner. He defended my own home from that bastard Kolya's recent cowardly attempt to take us down."

One of the other men grunts, nodding in my direction. "Impressive, but it's no small thing you two are attempting," he mutters, glancing around the circle. "With the Mori-kai and Nikolayev Bratva working together, you're stirring up a hornet's nest with Kolya Ishida. His people won't take it well."

I smile, unfazed. "They're welcome to take it however feels best for them," I shrug. "They're still going to take it."

Another of the men clears his throat. "The problem," he grunts, leaning in almost conspiratorially and throwing a significant look around the group, "is that Kolya isn't the only one running his empire these days."

I raise an eyebrow. "Meaning?"

One of the other men pipes up, nodding sagely. “They say Kolya’s daughter’s been helping him behind the scenes, running operations with even more of an iron fist than her father.”

Miyamoto scoffs, rolling his eyes. “Fairy tales and gossip, my friends. Kolya’s daughter died years ago.”

The first man shakes his head. “She didn’t. She’s alive, and just as twisted as her father.”

“No one’s seen her in years,” Miyamoto grunts, his gaze flinty. “Doesn’t sound very alive to me.”

I frown, the wheels in my head turning. Kenzo mentioned a plan that Takeshi’s been cooking up involving the Ishida-kai, one that he’s kept suspiciously quiet. This unknown daughter could complicate things. It’s worth keeping an eye on.

As the conversation drifts, I take my chance to retreat from the group, muttering something about getting a drink. I’m halfway to the bar when I notice Miyamoto at my elbow, his gaze soft, reflective.

“Don’t let them worry you about the Ishida-kai,” he sighs. “They’re like gossiping grandmothers sometimes. But with your family and the Mori-kai presenting a united front, and my empire and connections?” He shrugs. “Kolya Ishida will *wish* he had a daughter to help him rule.” He smirks as he nods at the bar. “What’s your poison?”

“Whiskey works.”

He whistles. “A Bratva man who doesn’t drink vodka.”

“Always keep them guessing?” I smile.

He grins, turning to get us both a healthy pour of Hibiki seventeen year from the bartender. He passes a glass to me, knocking his against it.

“*Kanpai*,” he grunts.

“*Na zdoroviehe*,” I murmur back as we both take a sip.

“Look, Damian-san,” Miyamoto says quietly. “I know it’s…demanding, this little game we’re playing. I’m sure pretending to be engaged to someone can’t be easy.”

I offer a half-smile. “Wouldn’t call it a hardship, exactly.”

He nods thoughtfully. “Tokyo is different from Kyoto. It requires a certain...patience.” He pauses, giving me a respectful nod. “But you’re doing a good job, Damian-san. I’m proud to call you and your uncle allies.”

He bows slightly, making his words feel heavier, like a binding agreement. I bow back, feeling the surge of satisfaction that comes with knowing your hard work has paid off.

With a final nod, Miyamoto drifts away, leaving me alone with my thoughts…and an itch to find Hana.

When my head swivels to scan the room, though, I see a tall Japanese man watching me from nearby with quiet intensity. He nods and approaches me with calm, almost sinister arrogance.

“Mr. Nikolayev,” he begins smoothly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

I don’t return his smile. “And you are?”

“My name is Ryu,” he nods. “I represent the interests of Kolya Ishida.”

“What do you want?” I growl.

He chuckles softly, tucking his hands into his pockets. “I come bearing a message from my boss.” He leans in, lowering his voice. “He’s aware of the nature of your… *engagement* to Ms. Mori—and the reasons for the, shall we say, *farce*. Mr. Ishida is a keen student of fact versus fiction.”

I grind my teeth. “It would be in your best interests to get to the point of this conversation.”

Ryu’s eyes glint. “Ishida-san is a man of twin ancestry—Russian and Japanese. He feels a duty to appeal to, and appease, both sides.” He pauses, letting his words settle. “Perhaps, Mr. Nikolayev, my boss would like to extend an olive branch to just one *half* of this…alliance.”

My jaw clenches. “What are you insinuating?”

Ryu’s gaze is cold. “Merely that Ishida-san sees potential for a future partnership with your uncle.” He smiles thinly. “And *only* with your uncle.”

A tense silence settles between us.

“My sister,” I say tightly, “in case your boss hasn’t heard, is *married* to Kenzo Mori.”

Ryu shrugs. “Not your sister by blood.” He lets the words hover in the air.

I don’t give a shit if I’m not technically related to Annika. She’s been a sister to me since our paths first crossed years ago.

“You have a choice to make,” he says with another dismissive shrug. “Cling to your arrangement with the Mori-kai, a faded empire that’s not what it once was.” His lips curl. “Or, ally yourself with the Ishida-kai. Be wise, Mr. Nikolayev. Choose the winning side of history.”

My eyes lock with his. “Is that a threat?”

Ryu’s expression is unblinking. “It’s whatever you want it to be.” He adjusts his collar, flicking off invisible lint. “You have a week to consider. After that, the terms will change.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I growl, clenching my fists.

Ryu’s eyes harden. “It means…” He leans in closer, his voice a lethal whisper. “One member of your family, every five days, until you decide to make the right choice.”

My reaction is instant. I grab him by the throat, feeling his even pulse under my hand, his calmness as maddening as his threat. “My Yakuza-speak is a little rusty,” I snarl, the darkness in me surging, out for blood. “Why don’t you translate for me.”

Ryu looks at me, unfazed, and tilts his head. “I’m sure your Yakuza-speak is quite adequate for this conversation.”

“Even so,” I hiss, reaching into my jacket with my free hand. “Allow me to respond in a language we both speak fluently.”

The blade flicks open as I yank it out of my jacket and bring it to Ryu's jugular.

Ryu clears his throat delicately. Movement surrounds me, and I'm suddenly hyper-aware that there are five men strategically placed around us, their hands hovering inside their jackets. I catch the glint of *katana* hilts.

"Your move, Mr. Nikolayev," Ryu murmurs, his voice thin and poisonous.

Slowly, I release him, fury simmering beneath my skin. He straightens, adjusting his collar again. "Think about it," he says quietly, turning away. "Though I'd advise you not to think too long."

I watch in silence as he and his men slip like shadows into the crowd before disappearing entirely.

Fuck. I need some air.

I thread my way through the crowded foyer to one of the quieter corridors, finally able to breathe. As I round a corner, my gaze locks onto a scene that drains every ounce of whatever patience I have left in a heartbeat.

Hana stands there, looking up at a man who has his arms around her in a casual hug. He smiles at her, and every cell in my body roars for *murder*, burning away any sense of rationality.

I march toward them even as he turns and walks away. My steps are deliberate, my fists clenched. She doesn't notice me until she spins, startled, and bumps right into my chest, gasping as she looks up.

"Who the *fuck* was that?" I growl sharply.

Then I realize Hana's shaking, her face white and haggard, like she's just seen a ghost. The look in her eyes is the same one she had last night: haunted, raw, like she's miles away from this room. From me. From everything.

Without thinking, I pull her into my arms, wrapping her in my warmth, holding her tight.

"Who was that?" I ask again, softer this time.

She trembles. “He…that night. He…”

I turn cold when it clicks.

That night.

The night she told me about, there were two others there, off-camera. They laughed and did nothing while she screamed and cried. Every nerve in my body snaps to attention, and I see red like it’s the only color that exists.

“*Who,*” I growl, quietly but venomously.

“Prescott Harding,” she whispers, voice hollow. “He… He was there.”

“Wait here,” I order, letting her go reluctantly.

“Damian, no—”

I’m already gone.

The rage is a live wire running through my veins, an unstoppable current that sparks with every step I take. I follow Prescott as he heads into a stairwell that winds down into the underground parking garage.

He’s walking casually as he gets to the garage, oblivious. Even if he wasn’t, I don’t care about stealth. I don’t care about anything except making him regret every second he’s been allowed to breathe.

“Prescott,” I call out sharply.

He stops, his hand halfway to the door of an Audi. He turns around, confusion flashing in his eyes. “Can I help you?” he asks nervously, catching the expression on my face.

I remain silent as I march toward him, death etched across my face.

“Who—” He shivers. “Who are you?”

“I’m *Karma*, motherfucker,” I snarl, my voice low and dangerous. “And I’m here to blow up your whole fucking world.”

He backs against his car, hands raised slightly. “Look, I don’t know you—”

“No,” I growl. “But you do know Hana Mori.”

The color drains from his face. His eyes widen, panic flaring in them. “I—I don’t want any trouble.”

“Life is *full* of disappointments, Prescott”.

My fist meets his face with a sickening crunch. I barely feel the impact, watching impassively as he reels back, slamming into his car.

I stride forward, feeling the pulsing heat of raw fury overtaking me. Prescott’s bleeding mouth opens to stammer some pathetic plea for mercy.

He’ll get none from me.

I want to grind him into dust for what he did, what he watched and did nothing to stop, what he *laughed at*. My fist comes down again on his jaw, then his cheekbone, then his teeth. Prescott crumples, but I don’t stop.

He staggers back, clutching his face, blood trickling between his fingers as he tries to pull himself away, desperation in his eyes. I follow, relentless, feeling nothing but the need to destroy him, to make him feel an ounce of the horror he heaped on Hana.

I grab him by the collar and throw him against the nearest car. His head hits the metal with a satisfying thud, and I lean close, my voice darkening to a growl. “Thought you could just walk away, asshole? Like you didn’t do anything? Didn’t hurt anyone?”

He tries to respond, his words incoherent. I barely register the crowd growing around us, the horrified gasps and whispers, the sound of someone taking a photo with their phone.

Nothing matters right now except my hands on him, the wonderful sensation of his flesh turning to pulp under my fists.

Suddenly, there’s a hand on my arm, pulling me back to reality. I whirl, ready to tear apart whoever’s foolish enough to interfere, but I stop, frozen, when I find myself looking at Hana, pale, visibly shaken, but steady.

“Enough,” she says, her hand on my arm grounding me. “That’s enough now, Damian.”

The rage in me retreats as I look at her, the tension in my body draining away under her gaze. I let go of Prescott, who collapses unconscious in a heap, my focus solely on her. She threads her fingers through mine, gently pulling me away from the scene, away from the onlookers' stares and murmurs.

We slip around a corner of the garage, finally out of sight. The adrenaline still hums in my veins, raw and untamed, and without warning I grab her, savoring the gasp on her lips as I pin her against the wall. I tighten my grip on her, feeling that fierce, possessive fire rise within me again.

She stares up at me, her expression a mixture of shock and something dark and needy.

"I'd *kill* for you," I rasp, breath heavy, voice low, eyes boring into hers. "You're *mine*."

And planets collide as I crush my lips to hers.

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21

HANA

MY HEART IS POUNDING as I stumble behind Damian, his grip unyielding as he pulls me through the dimly lit parking garage. The adrenaline from watching him with Prescott is still burning in my veins, twisting into something dark, electric and unhinged.

He kicks open a side door, pulling me roughly after him and surging out into the crisp night air. The alley behind the theater is deserted, shadows stretching across brick walls. The noise of the city is distant, muted by the adjacent park.

Damian stops, letting go of my hand and turning to face me. The way he's looking at me should scare me—intense, dangerous, daring me to match him, step for step. But I can't pull away. My pulse is racing, my breath shallow, my skin practically buzzing with anticipation.

He doesn't say a word, just lifts his hand, brushing his fingertip along my jaw, grazing my skin with the lightest, softest touch. His thumb brushes over my bottom lip, tugging it open.

Something inside me crumbles. I've held onto so much for so long—my fears, my past, my iron grip on my boundaries. But now, with Damian looking at me like I'm the only thing he sees, everything else falls away and shatters at my feet.

A quiet whimper escapes my lips. His eyes darken as he steps closer, a low growl slipping from him, possessive, unrestrained.

“Let’s get one fucking thing straight, Kitsune,” he hisses darkly, his violet eyes shining maniacally in the darkness. His hand wraps around my throat, pushing me back until I feel the hard bricks at my back, sending my pulse skyrocketing.

“You. Are. Fucking. *Mine*,” he rasps, his lips less than an inch away and his breath teasing over my skin. “I’ll fucking *kill* for what’s mine,” he growls. “And I will fucking *take* what’s mine.”

His mouth brutally slams down on me, smashing and destroying whatever possible defenses I have left, his tongue demanding entrance as it swirls and dances with my own.

We’ve already crossed every line and broken every boundary I thought I’d always have.

But in that kiss, something changes. Snaps. Shifts. The last lies about this being “pretend” or “just an act” that we’ve used to seal the cracks in the dam collapse.

And when the water rushes out, there’s no stopping the flood from sweeping us both away.

I whimper when Damian roughly grabs my hips and spins me around, pinning me against the brick wall, sending a rush of electricity through me that grounds me even as I feel myself coming undone.

His hands slide up my arms, pinning my wrists over my head, and I revel in the way he holds me like I’m *his*. There’s no room for anything else in my mind. No past, no regrets. Just the raw, unfiltered sensation of Damian.

He grabs a fist of my hair, yanking and twisting my head around. His mouth crashes to mine, his lips rough, teeth grazing my lower lip until I gasp, the line between pleasure and pain deliciously blurred.

This is freedom, I realize—this dark, reckless surrender. This is what it means to truly let go, to be completely liberated. I thought I’d never feel it.

But Damian knows my darkness. He’s been there, he understands it, and in his possessive grip, I feel alive. More alive than I have in years.

He kisses me harder, and I match him with a fervor that surprises even me. It's like I'm tapping into some buried part of myself, something fierce and unstoppable, something only he has ever managed to reach. I know, in some wild, reckless corner of my mind that he could ruin me completely, and I wouldn't care.

His mouth drops to my neck, biting and sucking as I cry out for more. He keeps my hands pinned above my head as he yanks at something with his other arm, and it takes me a second to realize it's his tie.

I whimper as he brings it up and starts to wrap it around my wrists, binding them tightly together. He reaches up, looping the end of the tie around an old hook set into the brick above my head and pulling it tight until my arms stretch high above my head before he ties that end tight around my wrists.

Chaining me to the wall, completely at his mercy.

His teeth rake down my neck as his hands slide around me, cupping my breasts and roughly pinching and rolling my tender nipples through my gown. I cry out, moaning and arching against him, desperate for his touch, his roughness.

I moan when he savagely rips open the plunging neckline of the dress, spilling my breasts into his brutal hands. His fingers tug and pinch at my nipples again, making me cry out sharply as pleasure and pain explode throughout my system.

One of his hands slides between us, yanking up the hem of my gown and roughly reaching between my legs. I whimper eagerly as his strong fingers stroke my slick pussy through my drenched panties, rolling over my aching clit through the lace.

He groans darkly behind me.

"Now now," he rasps into my ear. "What *exactly* has this messy little cunt so wet, Kitsune?"

"*You*!" I choke, moaning as I writhe against him.

"No one else?" he snarls warningly.

“*Never*,” I whimper, pushing back against his hand.

“And what *about* me has made such a fucking mess of this pretty pussy?”

I shudder.

“When you…before…you…” I gasp as he starts to rub my clit in slow, deliberate, teasing circles.

“*Say it*,” he growls.

“When you…” I feel my face throb. I’m unable to acknowledge this kind of darkness inside me.

“You *liked* watching me beat that little fuck,” he rasps low in my ear.

I shudder as I hear the forbidden truth in my ear, whimper as my teeth sink into my bottom lip.

“You *liked* the violence, and the blood,” he hisses. He yanks my panties aside, and I cry out when he shoves two thick fingers into me.

“*That’s* what’s made such a fucking greedy mess of this little pussy, Kitsune,” he snarls. “Watching me spill blood for you. Commit violence to protect you.”

I whimper, my legs shaking as my eyes squeeze shut.

“You don’t even have to say it,” he growls. “Your pussy is spilling every dark secret you have. You *liked* watching me do that. You got *wet*, watching me destroy for you.”

His fingers pump into me, stroking against my g-spot over and over as I cry out against the bricks, straining against the bonds at my wrists.

“Maybe next time, I’ll fucking *kill* for you, right in front of you,” he snarls. “And fuck you in the pool of blood so you know how fucking *mine* you are.”

Oh fuck…

Whatever unhinged, depraved mania this is, I’m helpless to stop it. It’s not just the rough way he’s stroking my g-spot and rubbing my clit. It’s not just

the savage way he has me pinned and tied to the wall.

It's that I know he's right.

I *am* as dark and as fucked up as him.

Because I *am* wet at the thought of him spilling blood for me.

Without warning, Damian slips his fingers from my pussy and drops down behind me. I gasp sharply as he shoves my legs apart and yanks my panties down, letting them tighten around my spread knees. He shoves up my gown, and when I feel his mouth on me, I cry out into the darkness.

"*Damian!*"

A moan rips from my throat as he dives into my dripping wet pussy. He licks my clit from behind, sucking the swollen nub between his lips and swirling the tip of his tongue over it until my legs are shaking and my breath turns ragged and rough.

He spanks my ass hard, making me squeal and yelp as he tongue fucks me. My eyes roll back, my body sagging against the tie binding my wrists to the wall as he pushes deep inside me, tasting every part of me.

His thumb starts to rub my clit, the other hand gripping my ass and spreading me wide open as he devours me. His tongue slips back, and suddenly, my eyes bulge.

"*Fuck…*"

Pure fire consumes me when I feel his tongue swirling around my asshole. I moan gutturally, shaking and trembling as he licks my ass while rubbing my clit. He forces his tongue deeper, prying me open as I choke out a ragged moan. My legs tremble at the forbidden feeling of his tongue there, the pure eroticism of it setting me ablaze.

His mouth slips back to my clit, sucking on it as his finger teases slow circles around my back hole. My world begins to shatter at the edges, the explosive sensations of his fingertip and his tongue sending me soaring.

The throb inside of me tightens to a knot. The heat begins to consume me, my very skin tingling from my toes and fingertips right into my core. I can

feel my legs shaking, the bite of my panties around my knees and the unyielding tightening of the tie around my wrists grounding me and setting me free.

His lips wrap around my swollen clit. His tongue dances over it as the tip of his finger teases my most forbidden place.

It's like pulling a trigger.

With a sharp cry, I'm exploding for him, writhing shamelessly back against his face as I come *hard* on his tongue.

I'm still trembling when he stands and roughly yanks his pants open. I moan desperately, greedily, when I feel the hot thickness of his fat cock against my thighs, his hand stroking his length against me.

"*No one* touches you but me," he growls, leaning down to bite my earlobe, making me cry out. "Not in this life, or the next. I'll make sure every fucking inch of you thinks of me every time you fucking breathe."

He centers his huge, swollen cock against my slick opening, teasing me.

"You *belong* to me," he hisses savagely, an unhinged note in his voice that drives me wild. "And I'll carve both our names into the skin of any man who even looks at you, so they never forget *whose you fucking are*."

He thrusts roughly into me, burying every thick inch of his gorgeous cock in me in one stroke. I cry out in pleasure, arching my back and shuddering as I feel my walls stretch to let him inside. He's so fucking big—so all-consuming, so *everything*. The sensation of him knocking the air from my lungs as he takes me has me reeling, desperate for more.

He grabs a handful of my hair, twisting it roughly around his fist and tugging hard. He draws his cock out, leaving just the fat, swollen head inside. Then he tugs my hair sharply, making me cry out as he drives back into me, hard.

Damian's abs slap against my ass with every brutal thrust as he starts to fuck me like a machine. I don't even recognize the primal, animal sounds coming from my mouth and throat as I lose myself in the sensations of him utterly claiming me.

His thick cock pounds into me, the wet sounds of my pussy stretching around his size filling my ears as slickness drips down my quivering thighs. His hand reaches around to twist and pinch my aching nipples brutally, drawing ragged screams of pleasure from my lips.

His hand slides up to cup my jaw, and his thumb sinks into my mouth.

"*Suck*," he groans, pounding into me.

My head spins, the sensations almost overwhelming as he fucks into me. My lips wrap around his thumb, and I moan as I start to suck it eagerly, swirling my tongue around it.

He slips his thumb from my mouth, only to replace it with his other hand. Two fingers push deep across my tongue, like he's laying claim to my mouth as he fucks me from behind. Then the first hand slips down between us, and when I feel the slickness of his thumb tease over my ass, my eyes fly wide.

"*Damian*…"

"*Every fucking part of you*, Kitsune," he rasps. "Every inch of your skin. Every fucking hair on your head. Every greedy, slutty little hole you have."

His wet thumb pushes against my tight ring.

Holy fuck.

The pressure builds until I slowly feel myself open for him. I choke out a wrenching, mumbled cry around his fingers, drool dripping down my chin as his thumb sinks into my ass. His fat cock rams deep into me, and the sensation of him claiming every single part of me all at once catapults me into the stratosphere.

"*There's* a good girl," he groans, his hips crashing against my ass. "Taking me everywhere like a greedy little whore. Let me feel you fucking explode for me, Kitsune."

Reality blurs at the edges, my world spinning as I lose myself to his all-consuming power.

“*Come for me, Kitsune*,” he hisses into my ear. “Let me feel you come, knowing I’d fucking *kill* for you. Knowing I’d burn the fucking world for you. *Come. Right. Fucking. Now.*”

The sound that explodes from my throat is subhuman. My body jerks and spasms, as if I’ve just stepped on a live wire. My core wrenches and twists, my toes curling inside my shoes and my entire body shuddering as the orgasm sweeps through me like a firestorm.

I scream around his fingers as I feel myself clamp down around his cock and his thumb. Damian roars as he rams into me, burying his huge cock balls-deep as he starts to throb and pulse. His hot, sticky cum spills into me, flooding into me so hard that I can feel it leaking out around where we join to drip down my thighs into my panties.

Reality fades in and out as he unties my wrists, slips out of me, and turns me in his arms. As he captures my jaw and pins my back to the wall, kissing me fiercely. As he shoves my panties off my heels and wraps my legs around his hips.

As he sinks into me.

And we start all over again.

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22

DAMIAN

IT'S WELL past midnight and Tokyo is blanketed in moonlight outside the dark hotel room. I sit on the corner at the foot of the bed, watching Hana sleep.

I won't be joining her.

For all the barriers we've broken through, this one remains—a last ghost of her past. She still can't bring herself to sleep in a bed with me. We did try earlier tonight, and she made a heroic effort to look like she was fine. But it was painfully clear she wasn't.

We'll get there. Maybe we won't. Either way, the fact that I'm saying shit like "we" speaks volumes.

Speaks to a reality I'm still not sure how to process, and never expected.

She's so beautiful. So strong and yet so delicate…

A wave of protectiveness rolls over me as I watch her chest rise and fall, and I don't even realize I'm still on the phone until Kir's tone on the other end sharpens.

"Are you hearing me?"

I exhale and turn away from Hana, the moment shattered.

"*Yeah*," I growl quietly. "I hear you."

“I don’t care if Prescott is a douchebag, Damian. Both the Mori family and ours had plans to work with Edo Analytics. Your little stunt is putting more eyes on us than we need right now.”

“You can still work with them,” I drawl unhurriedly, leaning into my irritation. “I bet they’d be *thrilled* for the business.”

“Damian.” Kir’s voice tightens. “You put one of their senior analysts in a fucking coma.”

I scoff, enjoying the memory—the feeling of Prescott’s facial bones breaking, of releasing all the anger I’d felt simmering just below the surface.

“This is *not* why I sent you to Japan,” Kir hisses, voice icy.

Something inside me snaps. I stalk to the bathroom, half shutting the door so as not to wake Hana, my restraint wavering. “Then why *did* you send me here, Uncle?” I challenge, my voice dark. “You know what I am. You know what I *do*.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line.

Yeah… Kir *does* know who and what I am. He’s probably the only reason I learned to remotely cage those urges—learned to assimilate into normal society and channel my violent tendencies in productive ways.

Well, productive if you happen to be a member of a Bratva family.

“Damian…” Kir says, softer now. “What happened back there?”

I grind my teeth, my eyes flickering toward the half-open door where Hana sleeps. I don’t want to tell him, but for once, I don’t think I can hide what I’m feeling. Kir’s quiet a few seconds, then he sighs.

“Can I take a guess?”

“Go ahead,” I snap.

“It’s Hana, isn’t it.”

I don’t answer. I don’t need to. The silence stretching between us is answer enough, and I know Kir hears it too.

“I never taught you how to deal with that, did I,” he murmurs quietly. “Balancing your rage and your impulses against having feelings for someone.”

“Why,” I growl. “Because you never excepted me to find someone to give a shit about?”

He exhales. “The men in our family rarely do,” he says quietly. “Trust me.”

Kir’s a striking, good-looking man. He’s tall, he’s built like a guy half his age, not to mention he’s phenomenally wealthy and one of *the* most powerful Bratva leaders in the world.

You’d expect a man like him to have women falling for him all the time. And, yes, they frequently do, but he’s not exactly trying to catch them. I don’t think Kir’s dated once the entire time I’ve known him. Annika and Freya used to joke that he was secretly into men. But that’s not it.

No, I think he’s right: the men of our family *don’t* typically find…

I glance across the darkness to Hana again, my heart beating a little faster.

This. Whatever *this* is.

“There’s something else I need to talk to you about,” I mutter. “Kolya Ishida made contact tonight, via an envoy.”

I can practically hear Kir’s jaw grinding. “Did he, now,” he growls. “What does he want?”

“For us to split with the Mori family and partner with him.”

Kir snorts. “Of course he does. Divide and conquer. His Russian half is showing.”

I sigh heavily. “Yeah, well, the offer came with threats.”

“Against?”

“Our family. The Mori family.”

Kir exhales. “And your thoughts?”

I shake my head. “I don’t doubt that Kolya is a man of action, even brutal action. But I *think* the threats tonight were simply that—threats. I also think they mean he’s worried,” I mutter. “He sees the writing on the wall and realizes that a joint Nikolayev-Mori incursion into Tokyo is going to throw off the balance of a lot of things he has an interest in here. He needed to make his voice heard, loudly, because he needs to split us from the Mori-kai to weaken his enemies.”

Kir chuckles quietly. “You’re a good student, nephew.”

“I had a decent enough teacher,” I grin.

“What does the student think we should do next?”

I draw in a breath. “I doubt Kolya is going to try anything. But I do think we should bulk up security. We’ve got some men just sitting around in Kyoto. I’m going to get them on a bullet train here by tomorrow morning, and I’m going to suggest to Kenzo that he send some of his guys with them.”

“Fortification. Smart move,” Kir murmurs. “Good work.”

There’s a pause.

“Is the extra security for our interests, or the Mori-kai’s?”

I frown. “Well—we’re on the same team…”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then speak clearer,” I growl.

“Fine.” My uncle coughs delicately. “Is the extra security for you, or for Hana?”

My jaw sets.

“I can handle myself, Kir.”

He chuckles quietly. “That’s the only answer I need.”

* * *

PART OF BEING a good hunter entails being good at waiting.

That's exactly what I do when it comes to Prescott Harding.

In my world, I don't have the luxury of believing in coincidences. So when Hana gets a random surprise iPad delivered with a recording of her assault on it, and then one of the fuckers *from* that night just happens to cross her path within twenty-four hours?

Like I said: me and coincidences don't exactly see eye-to-eye.

Prescott's been in a medically induced coma since I beat him so badly that he had brain swelling, but he's awake now.

Which means it's time to pay him a visit and have a little *chat*.

I'm not worried about him tattling to the authorities. I've checked with my sources, and while the police *were* at the hospital earlier to talk with him about the attack after he woke up, Prescott was smart enough to say he thought it was a random attack by a stranger.

That, or someone smarter than him had the good sense to gently let him know who exactly I am and suggest that might be a wise response.

I adjust the mask over my nose and mouth, squirming uncomfortably in the one-size-too-small hospital scrubs I stole from the employee locker room. Nobody pays me any attention as I slip through the halls of the hospital until I get to Prescott's room.

It's unguarded. Maybe he's *not* so smart after all.

I slip inside the dim room, locking the door before I turn to level a cold glare at the man lying in the hospital bed. He's asleep, the machines he's hooked up to beeping and whirring rhythmically as I approach. I turn off the sensor connected to the main nurses' station.

No need for us to be interrupted when his heart rate inevitably goes through the roof.

The table beside his bed is full of bouquets of flowers and cards: some from his coworkers at Edo Analytics, some from his family back home in the

U.S. There's also a framed picture of him with some girl that appears to be his girlfriend.

I take a picture of it, glancing at the card next to it to see that her name is Sarah. *Sarah* will soon be hearing from me, suggesting that she ask her boyfriend about the night he watched and laughed while his buddy tried to rape a girl.

Should make for interesting date-night conversation.

I grab Prescott's phone from the table, bring it to his face, and pry open one of his eyes to unlock it. The fucker stirs but doesn't wake.

The phone does, though.

I flip through his recent calls, and my mouth tightens. Yeah, just as I thought. There's one earlier today, probably right after he came out of his coma, to Edward Radcliffe.

The *other* motherfucker who watched that night: rats, clinging to each other as the ship goes down.

I move closer to the bed, my fingers tightening into fists as I lean over him. Prescott stirs again, and this time his eyes flutter open. His gaze slowly comes into focus, and when he sees me leaning over him, he jolts with a startled whimper, the confusion in his gaze giving way to pure terror. His mouth starts to open, but my hand clamps it shut and keeps it like that as his eyes bulge.

"Hush now," I murmur, sick satisfaction rolling through me. "This won't take long."

Prescott's face turns the color of rotten milk, his eyes wide and horrified.

"I'm going to ask you a question. Then I'm going to release your jaw so that you can answer. If you scream, call out, or otherwise bullshit me, I'll kill you *long* before any help arrives. Nod if you fucking understand."

He nods emphatically.

"Good boy," I growl, leveling my gaze at him. "Did you send Hana an iPad the other day?"

I lift my hand away from his mouth.

Prescott's brow furrows, then he quickly shakes his head. "*No!*" he blurts. "No, I—"

"One with the *video* one of you little fucking ghouls took of her that night, when your dead pal Josh tried to rape her with his limp whiskey dick?"

Prescott shakes his head again. "No. I swear to you—"

My hand clamps down over his mouth. "Next question. Who all knows about that night? Be specific, and don't you *dare* fucking lie."

He gulps as my hand comes away again.

"There…there was me—"

"No fucking shit," I growl.

He shrivels under my gaze. "And…and Josh. And Edward."

"Who you called earlier."

He swallows heavily, his throat working. "Yeah, just to check in and—"

I flick open my knife.

"Okay, okay!" he whimpers. "I got a text from him when I was still under."

"Saying?"

"Nothing really," Prescott bleats. "Just that he wanted me to call him asap." He shrinks again under my glare. "You can check my phone."

I do. Sure enough, there's a text from Edward, two nights ago:

EDWARD RADCLIFF

Call me, man. SOS! I'm fucking scared, dude.

I frown at it before my eyes slide back to Prescott. "What was he scared of?"

"Dunno."

"But you called him."

“Yeah. But he didn’t answer.”

I exhale sharply. “Well, what *would he* be scared of?”

Prescott makes a face. “Take your pick.”

I frown. “Meaning?”

“Ed’s into some bad shit, man. He’s…” he winces. “He’s trying to get help, but he’s got some issues.”

“Like?”

“Gambling and cocaine, mainly,” Prescott mumbles. “It’s fucking up his life. His wife left him last year after the senator fired him.”

My brow furrows. “Senator?”

Prescott swallows heavily. “He worked for Josh’s father, Senator Donahue. They tried to get him to clean up, but eventually, they had to let him go because of the drug issues.”

I scowl. “Who else knew about what happened that night?”

Prescott hesitates.

“*Answer me*,” I snarl coldly, making him cower.

“Josh’s parents,” he blurts, his face stricken. “After what happened… I mean, we all had suspicions.”

“About the car crash?”

Prescott’s eyes dart side to side nervously.

“Something you’d like to mention?” I growl.

“Well,” he says nervously. “It *was* suspicious.”

“How so.”

He looks at me. “Josh was the most popular guy I’ve ever known. I mean, he was magnetic. The dude *always* had a flock of people around him, girls hanging off him.”

“How the fuck does that make his death suspicious?”

Prescott answers instantly. “Because if the guy was going to drive drunk off a cliff, there’d have been at *least* one other drunk kid in the car with him.”

Shit.

I guess Takeshi didn’t think about that.

“Anyway,” Prescott swallows. “Senator Donahue and his wife came to me and Ed. Like, they had questions, same as us.”

“And?”

He looks away. “We…told them about that night.”

My teeth grind.

“Who filmed the video.”

Prescott gives me a weak look. “Please,” he whispers. “I mean, we were all kids—”

“*Who*.”

His face turns the sort of shade that tells me the answer before he grows the balls to spit it out.

“*I did*,” he whispers.

I nod slowly, turning to grab the spare pillow from the chair behind me. Prescott’s eyes go wide.

“Woah, hang on!” he cries anxiously. “You said—”

“I said I was going to ask you some questions, and you were going to answer them. Thanks for that, incidentally,” I growl. I cock my head at him. “Prescott, do you have any children?”

His brow furrows. “W-what?”

“Kids. Children. Offspring. *Heirs*,” I hiss. “Do you have any.”

It’s the one thing that might spare him tonight. What can I say, I hate turning kids into orphans.

Prescott shivers as he shakes his head side to side. “N-no?”

“That’s too bad.”

He does scream, briefly. But the pillow swallows it as I press it down over his face. He fights me as best he can for a minute, batting weakly at my arms as his legs kick and squirm.

I don’t do anything but watch. I even *laugh* at one point, just to make it that much more poetic. Eventually, he stops struggling and goes still.

Guess he and Sarah won’t be having that awkward conversation after all.

* * *

WHEN I STEP out of the hospital, the city around me feels sharper, clearer. I pull out my phone and dial Freya. She picks up on the second ring, her voice a mix of surprise and weariness.

“Hello, favorite cousin,” I say, my tone almost pleasant.

She sighs. “Only cousin. The word you’re looking for is *only*.”

I grin. “Who says it can’t be both?”

She chuckles quietly, and I can hear the click-clacking of her laptop keyboard in the background, which means she’s probably working. “What do you want, D?”

“Can you trace a number for me?”

Freya laughs wryly. “I’m a superhero, Damian. I can do anything.”

“*Love* the enthusiasm. I’m texting it to you now.”

I pull the phone away from my ear just long enough to text her Edward Radcliff’s number.

“Got it?”

“Yeah, got it,” she answers, laughing to herself.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she snickers. “This kind of request has been popular tonight, is all.”

I narrow my eyes, suddenly alert. “Meaning?”

“Hana called earlier,” she says, a chuckle slipping into her voice. “She wanted me to trace the shipping origin of a package.”

My fiancée’s a smart girl.

“And I’m assuming a superhero such as yourself managed to accomplish this?”

“Obviously. But it was a dead end. The package was sent from Seoul, but from a fake corporation.”

“Shit,” I mutter.

“Well, *that* wasn’t the dead end. But when I dug into that company, I came up with another fake company in Barcelona that sent it from there to South Korea. *That’s* the dead end.”

I sigh. “Got it.”

“Look, it’ll take me a little while to trace this. Want me to call you when I get it?”

“That’d be great. Thanks, Frey.”

“Anytime. So, how’s Tokyo, by the way?”

“Huge. Very neon.

She laughs. “And Hana?”

My answer doesn’t come right away, because my mouth twists into a grin as my pulse spikes.

None of this is lost on Freya.

“*Well then*,” she giggles.

“Not what you’re thinking.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s pretty close,” she laughs. Then she exhales slowly. “You’re being…good, though, right?”

I frown. “Meaning?”

“Damian…”

“*Freya*…”

“Hana is a friend.”

“And?”

“Play fucking nice with her,” she mutters. “Or else.”

“Bold move, making threats against people who are literally twice your size,” I chuckle.

“Oh, I wouldn’t fight you,” she says airily. “I’d just hack your bank account, steal your identity, fuck your credit, maybe set you up for a couple of felonies. You know, depending on my mood.”

I roll my eyes, grinning. “Miss you, Frey.”

“You too, dickhead. For real, though. You fuck with Hana, it’s going to end badly for you.”

I smile. “Heard loud and clear.”

I’m still smiling when I hang up. But my grin fades when I turn to glare up at the hospital.

The threats are starting to pile up. Pretty soon, something’s going to have to give.

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23

HANA

TAKESHI GRINS at me as I step out of the hotel lobby. He's leaning against a neon green Kawasaki racing bike, a hot pink one parked behind it. Kai looks unnerved as he swings his leg off the second bike and yanks off his helmet.

I giggle as I walk over. "You okay?"

Kai shoots Tak a look before glaring at me. "Your brother rides like he has a death wish."

"Aww, c'mon, Kai," Takeshi chuckles. "Not my fault you ride like a granny."

Kai grunts, sticking a cigarette between his lips and lighting it.

I arch a brow. "You know, I feel like you've been smoking less lately."

"It's his new lady friend," Tak smirks. "She's being a good influence."

Kai's expression turns dark as he whips around to shoot a withering look at my brother.

I laugh as I pat his arm. "It's cute how bashful you get. But Kai, you're not exactly good at hiding it."

"No shit," Tak smirks. "Just introduce us to her already, dude. I feel like I've met her already, with all those fucking hickeys she keeps leaving on your damn neck."

Kai’s face turns even darker as he puffs on his cigarette.

“Just teasing, big guy,” I grin as I give him a sideways hug and lean my head affectionately on his arm. “And hey—if you have the option *not* to involve your girlfriend in this insane family, I’d take it.”

“*Noted*,” he grunts.

My brother glances at me. “Ready to ride?”

“Definitely.”

A still-blushing Kai hands me the helmet he was wearing. Just then, I hear my name called behind me.

I turn, spotting Miyamoto in the back of a sleek black SUV parked at the curb. He gives me a smile through the open window, beckoning for me to come closer. I glance at Takeshi and Kai before I walk over.

“Would you mind joining me for a moment?” Miyamoto asks, his tone friendly but carrying a subtle weight.

I nod. He opens the door and slides over, giving me room to get in. The plush leather interior is warm, comfortable, and smells faintly of cigar smoke and very expensive scotch.

The door closes with a solid but quiet thud, and suddenly, we’re cocooned in the dim glow of the SUV’s soft lighting, separated from the bustling city just outside the tinted windows.

Miyamoto leans back, looking at me and folding his hands, the warmth in his eyes mixed with something calculating. “I wanted to talk to you about a potential investment,” he begins, his gaze flicking from my face to the city lights flashing past outside. “I’ve identified a building for sale in a prime location. It would be ideal for Mori Holdings’ Tokyo headquarters. Later, it could also serve…additional purposes for the Mori-kai.”

I lift an eyebrow, intrigued but cautious. We’ve definitely been feeling out our position in Tokyo, but this feels like a huge leap forward. “Oh?”

Miyamoto nods thoughtfully. “The building’s expensive, no question. But I believe it’s worth it. Central location, privacy, strong architecture, a huge

underground storage space with truck bays. It has all the features we'd need now and in the future—" He catches himself with a frown and shakes his head. "I don't know why I keep saying *we*. Force of habit, I suppose. Or this old brain can't comprehend the fact that I'll be retiring soon," he chuckles.

I grin, but then my brow worries. "Are we really at that stage, Katō-san?" I ask, picking my words carefully. "I mean, the Ishida-kai are watching our every move in Tokyo. Kolya isn't exactly a passive presence here, and the threats have been…constant."

Miyamoto's expression softens, and he nods slowly, looking past me as if deep in thought. "Kolya Ishida," he tsks, his tone disdainful. "I know this will sound ridiculous, given the way he welcomed you to Tokyo…" His brow darkens. "In my *own home*, at that," he spits. "But Kolya is more noise than action. He wants us to fear his presence, to think he has control over every inch of this city, but he's simply throwing his weight around. A power play—nothing more."

I frown slightly. "You really think that's all it is?"

He hesitates, his usual confidence wavering. "I do," he replies after a moment, not sounding entirely convinced. "Though, Hana…" His voice trails off.

I tilt my head, sensing the shift in his tone. "What?"

He clears his throat, looking slightly uncomfortable, which is rare for him. "I need to ask you a delicate question, and I hope you won't take it the wrong way."

I nod, signaling him to continue, though his tone has made my curiosity spike.

"I say this out of respect for you and your father, to whom I still feel I owe a great deal."

I smile. "Of course, Katō-san. What's on your mind?"

"The alliance between the Mori-kai and the Nikolayev Bratva…" he begins, choosing his words with care. "Just how…*concrete* is it?"

I bristle. “Very,” I answer, my voice firmer than I feel. I’m not used to anyone questioning the alliance, especially not someone from the inner circle. “I mean, it’s solidified by marriage at this point. Why?”

He sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to offend. It’s just… Kolya’s aggression might have more to do with your alliance with the Bratva than any plans for a Tokyo expansion. He has history with the Bratva. He might be viewing the Russian involvement as a personal vendetta layered on top of the other complications. If that alliance were *not* so concrete…”

My jaw tightens. “Are you suggesting we reconsider our alliance with the Nikolayevs?” The words come out colder than usual for me.

Miyamoto looks taken aback for a moment, holding up a hand in a placating gesture. “No, Hana, not at all. I apologize if it sounded that way.” He sighs. “I only mean… If the tension with the Ishida-kai escalates, we may need to take some…creative precautions.”

I nod slowly. “I appreciate the honesty, Katō-san. But as far as I’m concerned, this alliance isn’t going anywhere. The Mori-kai and the Nikolayev Bratva have an agreement that’s as firm as a family bond, and we don’t break those.”

Miyamoto nods, his expression returning to its usual calm. “Understood. I meant no disrespect. Just trying to think as shrewdly as your father would have.”

I let out a quiet sigh, feeling the tension loosen. “It’s fine,” I say. “And you know what?” I smile wryly. “Let’s go ahead and pull the trigger on that building.”

Miyamoto’s eyes light up, a pleased smile spreading across his face. “Yes?” His smile widens. “Excellent news. I’ll get the ball rolling immediately.”

I nod, unable to help smiling myself. “It’s time we started making our mark here properly. Kolya or no Kolya.”

He chuckles. “I couldn’t agree more.”

* * *

THE RUMBLE of the engine vibrates through me, a high, steady rhythm as we race through Tokyo. The city lights blur past in neon streaks, glinting off Takeshi's bike ahead of me. I let myself grin widely and rev the engine, losing myself in the thrill and shaking off the world.

It's been too long since we rode like this, just my brother and me, two machines slicing through the night. Takeshi *lives* for it, the roar of the engine and the wild rush of the wind. I'm not as addicted, but God, it feels good tonight.

The wind tangles my hair under the helmet, snapping me into a sharper sense of being, alive, present. It's just him and me, our bikes, and Tokyo's neon flashing by.

No pressures. No games. No ghosts from the past, or Ishida-kai drama.

Just us.

Takeshi speeds up, leaning low over his bike, and I follow, weaving through the late-night traffic like this is our city and everyone else is just a guest.

Ahead, he veers off to the side, pulling into a small roadside stand that glows under a myriad of neon lights. I roll to a stop beside him and shut off the engine. The silence is startling after the constant roar, and I take a second to adjust, watching him pull off his helmet and shaking out his hair.

"Hungry?" he asks, nodding at the food trucks and street food stands.

"Starving," I groan, slipping off my helmet and grinning as we browse what's on offer.

We end up grabbing some *takoyaki* and a couple of Kirin beers. This is our frequent ritual in Kyoto, too. Our post-ride routine. Our chance to unwind and talk, to catch up on whatever we don't say over family dinner or at Mori-kai meetings.

We grab a seat on a bench off to the side, the city looming tall, alive, and restless around us. I pop the cap off my beer, leaning back as Takeshi gives

me that twin brother stare that doesn't miss anything.

"So," he begins, abruptly breaking the silence. "Damian knows, doesn't he?" His tone is quiet, but there's an edge to it. "About Josh, I mean."

I pause, the words catching in my throat before I nod slowly, glancing away. "Yeah."

Takeshi's gaze is sharp. "You told him?"

Another nod. I feel something tighten in my chest, a mixture of guilt and relief, hoping that he understands.

"I'm sorry," I murmur.

He waves it off. "Don't be. If you told him, you had a reason. Both to trust him in the first place, and to tell him." There's a wry smile on his face. "And, let's be real—heir to a Bratva empire? Not exactly the kind of guy to rat me out."

"Low probability," I agree with a small smile, sipping my beer. "How'd you know?"

Takeshi smirks. "Crossed paths in the hotel this morning. He clapped me on the shoulder and nodded, then went about his day."

I raise an eyebrow. "You got all that from a *shoulder pat*?"

"Mind powers," he deadpans, tapping the side of his head. "Also, most times we cross paths, it's a miracle we don't knock each other out, so…"

I laugh, the sound easing some of the tension that's been living inside me. Takeshi's good like that. He always has a way of cutting through the bullshit, giving me space to breathe.

He looks at me again. "He doesn't know *all* of it, though, does he."

My gaze shifts away, the familiar dread pooling low in my stomach. "Why would you say that?"

"Hana…" he says, his voice softening, the weight of it settling over us. There's no judgment, just understanding.

I sigh, the words slipping out before I can stop them. “No. He doesn’t.”

Takeshi’s quiet for a moment, a thoughtful crease forming between his brows. “Maybe he should.” Then his gaze turns reflective. “What made you tell him at all?”

I swallow, the memory of the video flashing in my mind. “Do you remember that package? Left for me at the hotel? It was an iPad with a video.”

He frowns in confusion.

“From that night,” I say softly.

Takeshi’s face darkens, his jaw clenching. “Jesus Christ, Hana.”

“It’s nothing,” I mutter, brushing it off even as my heartrate spikes. “I mean, it is what it is.”

Tak swears viciously, shaking his head and shoving his fingers through his hair before glancing back at me. “Who the fuck sent it?” he growls, the protective edge in his voice unmistakable.

“Dunno.” I shrug, feeling the helplessness of that uncertainty settle over me again.

“We could trace the package—”

“Already did,” I say quietly. “Asked Freya to look into it.”

He raises an eyebrow. “And?”

I shake my head glumly. “Nothing. Shell company after shell company. The trail just goes cold.”

Takeshi swears under his breath, his eyes narrowing in thought. “You know,” he begins slowly, “I heard a rumor that Prescott Harding got the shit beaten out of him the other night. Right here in Tokyo, if you can believe it.”

My stomach lurches, but I keep my face neutral. “Crazy,” I murmur, taking another sip of my beer. “He does live here, though. Works here now.”

“How exactly would you know that?” he asks, an amused glint in his eye.

I give him a significant look. Takeshi chuckles. “I think I might end up liking your pretend fiancé more than I expected. You think Prescott sent the iPad?”

I shrug, my shoulders tensing. “Maybe. Could’ve been him, could’ve been someone else.”

“We could ask him,” Takeshi says, his tone darker. “Or it could be Edward.”

The name sends a shiver through me, memories I’ve tried to bury clawing to the surface. “Can we please talk about something else?”

Takeshi’s quiet for a second, his gaze flickering to the distance. “Or it could be…*them*.”

My spine snaps rigid. He doesn’t even have to say, I know who he’s talking about. But Tak’s the one this time who doesn’t know the full story.

Not when it comes to that. To *them*.

But that’s behind me now.

“Those aren’t people you fuck with…” he continues.

I grit my teeth, sudden anger rising in me. “We’re the Mori-kai, Tak. *We’re* the ones people don’t fuck with.”

He nods, a glimmer of pride in his eyes. He reaches across, clinking his beer bottle against mine. “Fuck, yeah. *Kanpai*.”

Tak’s phone dings with a text as we both sip our beers and munch on our *takoyaki*.

“Fuck,” he grunts, reading it.

I frown as I turn to him. “What’s up?”

My twin’s face is lined and grim as he glances up at me. “Speaking of Prescott…”

My brow furrows. “Yeah?”

“Guess we won’t be talking to him. He just coded out at the hospital.”

I go still.

“He’s dead, Hana.”

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24

HANA

THE BLINKING neon lights of Tokyo filter through the tall windows of our hotel suite. It's dark when I walk in, the only light except for the those outside coming from Damian's laptop.

He looks up at me when I walk in. The grin on his face fades when he sees the dark look on mine.

"Fuck," he growls, instantly closing the laptop and coming toward me. "What happened?"

Our faces are lit in dramatic pinks and blues from the neon outside as I stand in front of him, looking up into his face, my pulse racing.

"I…" My throat bobs. "I need to tell you something."

He frowns but says nothing, just waits for me to continue.

"There's more to what happened that night with Josh than I've told you," I whisper, unsure where to begin. The weight of it all starts to press down on me.

Damian's eyes narrow at the mention of that asshole's name. But there's no judgment on his face. Just concern.

"After what Takeshi…did…" I swallow as I look down at my hands. "Josh's parents came to the house to talk to me. Tak wasn't home, and Mom was kind of on the way out at that point, so she wasn't really present. So it was just me and them."

A cold shiver runs down my spine.

“They knew,” I whisper. “About what happened. I mean, they didn’t *know*-know. It’s not like they had video proof or anything.” I shake my head. “But they *knew*, Damian. And they were both so fucking powerful. I mean, his dad’s a fucking senator. His mom’s a circuit judge. Meanwhile I was just this eighteen-year-old kid, scared of out of my mind.”

Damian’s hands take mine, squeezing them, pulling me close. But he doesn’t say a word, just lets me get it out.

“That was the first time I paid them.”

He sucks in a breath. “*What*?”

“They told me they knew what my brother did, and that they knew I’d helped him cover it up. They knew about Kenzo and Mal working under Sota here in Japan.” I look up at him, my face pleading. “They could have destroyed my family, Damian. At the very least, they could have sent Tak to prison. And they told me so.”

I take a shaky breath. “My mom low-key collected art. And she had this piece that she *adored* hanging on our living room wall—this gorgeous piece from the Dutch painter van Ravesteyn. She loved that painting, and it was worth something like half a million dollars.”

My mouth drops.

“Senator Donahue looked right at it and announced he’d be taking it home that very night, in exchange for his silence.”

Damian stiffens.

“Mom was really out of it by then, and very confused a lot of the time. I had to lie to her face and tell her the painting was away for cleaning when she noticed it was missing.”

A tear rolls down my cheek.

“I told her it was at the cleaners for a year until she died.”

My breath hitches as Damian wraps his arms silently around me.

“That’s how I got so good at laundering money.” My voice turns bitter. “I’ve been doing it for *years*. The painting was just the start. A few months later, they wanted more. The first time I laundered, it was to hide money I stole from my own family to pay those fuckers off.”

Damian’s expression shifts from stunned silence to fierce anger.

“Jesus, Hana,” he growls.

“For years, they kept demanding money. Sometimes Josh’s father, sometimes his mother. They threatened me. Threatened to expose Takeshi for what he did unless I kept paying them.” My throat tightens. “Not even Tak knows that part. I mean he knows they came to see me and made some veiled threats, but not about the payoffs.”

Damian is silent, his gaze unblinking. I can see his mind working as he processes what I’ve just told him.

“A year or so ago, the demands for money stopped,” I continue, my voice echoing hollowly in the stillness of the room. “I thought it was over. But now…”

“You think they might be the ones who sent the iPad?” he asks, his voice darkening.

I nod, feeling like every word further exposes the cracks in my life I’ve hidden from everyone else.

“With my family’s name linked to yours, they probably see a bigger payday. Greater leverage.” I look away, shame prickling beneath my skin. “There you have it, Damian. Now you’ve got even more on me. Might as well spill all my sins while you’re at it.”

There’s a moment of heavy silence where I expect him to say something harsh or judgmental. Instead, he pulls me to his chest, reaching down to tip up my jaw, lifting my teary gaze to his. His touch is steady, grounding, but there’s something dark and vulnerable in his eyes.

“Hana,” he growls, his voice low. “There is no more leverage.”

I laugh bitterly. “There *is*, Damian. You know all of it now. The shit with The Kitsune…what Tak did…this. You have all that on me now.”

A shadow crosses his face. He drops his hands from my shoulders, crossing his arms as he stares into the middle distance, his gaze tinged with a vulnerability I’ve never seen in him before.

“When I was eight,” he begins quietly, “a man came up to me on the playground where I was with my nanny. He told me he had a present for me, and he handed me an iPod.” He pauses, his jaw working as he relives the memory, each word coming out slowly, like extracting a splinter. “It was full of all this cool music, and I was *ecstatic*. But it was our secret, he said. I couldn’t tell anyone about it, or it would be taken away.”

My chest tightens as I listen, seeing the little boy in him.

“So I stayed quiet about it,” he continues, his voice darkening with deep bitterness. “I kept it in my jacket pocket. That night, when my parents and I went out for pizza, I brought it with me.” He lets out a hollow laugh. “Except… It wasn’t just an iPod. It was a tracker. You see, because my mom was Kir’s sister, there was always this threat hovering in the background. When we went places, it was always with an escort, using multiple cars to confuse anyone who might be trying to follow.” His eyes level with mine. “And that’s how the men who killed my parents knew exactly where we were, which car to hit. I led them *right to us*.”

The breath leaves my body as my face crumples. “Damian…” I choke, my heart breaking for him.

“*I fucked up*, Hana.” His voice cracks, his dark eyes full of raw, unhealed pain. “I got my parents killed.”

I reach for him, my hands moving to his chest, but he shakes his head, turning away.

“Damian, you were just a kid,” I whisper, my voice gentle. “How could you have known?”

His jaw clenches, anguish flashing across his face. “Our family was Bratva-connected, Hana. I should have guessed. I blinked, I let my guard down,

and because of that, *they died*.” His voice drops to a whisper. “I’ve never told a soul about that iPod. Not even Kir.”

The silence stretches out, each second filled with the weight of our shared secrets, our broken pasts. He meets my gaze, his vulnerability raw and exposed. “There you go,” he says, his voice rough. “That’s your leverage on me. We’re even. I have no hold over you.”

I reach up, cupping his face in my hands, feeling the rough stubble against my palms.

“Yes, you do,” I whisper as I pull him down and press my lips to his, my darkness finding a strange, twisted comfort in his.

And for the first time in years… I feel free.

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DAMIAN

KYOTO FEELS…DIFFERENT tonight.

Maybe it’s not the city itself. Or the house.

Maybe it’s her.

We’re all back at the Mori estate, celebrating Sota Akiyama’s seventh-seventh birthday. Well, almost all. Kir and Isaak are busy with something in New York. But I would guess that Kir’s gift, a *stunning* 1968 Ford Mustang GT 390 Fastback—green, just like in the movie *Bullitt*, which is Sota’s favorite, apparently—makes up for him not being here.

I watch Hana from one of the garden patios as she moves through the family gathering. There’s a light in her tonight. Something softer, and it’s messing with my head.

Takeshi’s loud laugh cuts through the low hum of conversation. Kenzo is arguing lightheartedly with Mal over something I can’t hear, and Freya and Annika are gabbing excitedly with a red-faced Kai across the patio. But all I really notice is Hana. She’s a vision.

And I *hate* that I sound like some idiot teenager with a crush, but there it is.

She laughs, her head tilting as she leans in to tell Sota something. He laughs too, and she squeezes his hand. She’s all softness and fire, and I’m drinking her in like I might never get to see her again. Maybe like I’m seeing her for the very first time.

The weird thing is, I feel at peace.

“So is this what you do now?” Freya’s voice pulls me back to the here and now. “Just stand there and stare at her like a creep?” She smirks, her eyes glinting. She laughs as I flip her off.

“Creep, huh?”

She snickers. “Not really. More like lovesick puppy.” She arches a brow. “You know, if you’re in this deep, you might just want to…oh, I don’t know…*tell her.*”

I roll my eyes. “Pro tip: you have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She scoffs, grinning. “Oh, for sure. I mean, what do I know? Not like you’re standing here staring at her like a junior high crush.”

She gives me a look, daring me to deny it, but I don’t give her the satisfaction. Instead, I just sigh, shaking my head as she grins.

Then she leans in, her voice dropping. “By the way, I traced that number you gave me for Edward Radcliff.”

My brow raise. “And?”

“He’s dead, Damian.”

I go still.

“He was found with his wrists slashed in the bathtub of his London flat a few nights ago. On the same night Prescott Harding mysteriously asphyxiated in the hospital after you beat the fuck out of him.”

She eyes me cooly. I don’t blink.

“Something you’d like to ask me, Frey?” I say quietly.

“I would, but I know you weren’t in London that night.” She gives me a hard look. “I *checked*.” She coughs delicately. “You know, a toll booth picked you up heading to the hospital where Prescott was staying on the night he died.” She exhales slowly. “Don’t get sloppy, Damian,” she mutters.

“Noted. Does anything appear suspicious with Edward’s suicide?”

My cousin frowns slightly. “You know, I’m really fucking good at what I do. But I can be even more helpful if I know what I’m looking for. What exactly am I trying to help you with?”

I shrug, feeling the weight of it settle over me. “It’s…something personal.”

Just then, Hana passes behind Freya. She turns, and when our eyes lock, she gives me a small, easy smile that disarms me in a way nothing else can, or ever has.

I manage to pull my attention back to Freya. When I do, she’s got a look on her face that says it all.

“Something personal involving Hana?” she says quietly.

Slowly, I nod.

“You really care about her, don’t you?”

“What if I do?” I growl quietly.

“I’d say that’s terrific,” she says quietly, squeezing my hand and grinning at me. “I’m happy for you, D. Both of you.”

Her face turns serious again.

“So, I *did* dig into Edward a little. Hacked his home computer, poked around his bank accounts. The usual.”

“Anything good?”

She makes a face. “Honestly, as suicides go, Edward’s is pretty buttoned up. Money issues. Drug issues. His wife left him a year ago when he got fired from his job.”

“Working for Senator Donahue,” I grunt.

That motherfucker’s father.

Who was shaking Hana down for years, holding what Takeshi did to avenge her over her head.

I blink away the rage and focus on Freya.

She nods. “Right, for Kempton Donahue. He won’t be Senator Donahue much longer, though.”

I frown. “Why not?”

“His term is up in two months, and he’s not seeking reelection. He’s been appointed Ambassador to Japan. He’s actually in Tokyo already.”

My mind flickers to that fucking iPad Hana received.

…Sent through shell companies.

Just then, Annika swings by, touching my arm. “Dinner’s ready. You coming?”

Mal materializes out of the shadows—the fucker’s good at that—and slips his arm wordlessly around Freya. He nods silently at me before scooping a squealing Freya into his arms and carrying her off to the dinner table.

I take my seat beside Hana, who’s sitting with a mix of elegance and ease, as though she belongs nowhere else but here.

Next to me.

Around us, Sota’s old Yakuza buddies share loud, raucous jokes and sake, and the air fills with warm laughter.

Takeshi makes some joke across the table, and Hana laughs, a musical sound that does strange things to my chest. Before I realize it, her hand is slipping into mine under the table and squeezing.

I’m done hiding. I’m done pretending this is anything but the most real thing I’ve ever felt, with anyone.

I lift our hands up and set them firmly on the table, still holding hers for everyone to see. A grin spreads over my face when her cheeks flush, but she doesn’t pull away. Takeshi glares at our hands for a second, but then gives a slight nod. Annika and Freya are beaming ear to ear. Kenzo initially looks confused, but then reads the room pretty fast and tilts his head in my direction. Mal shrugs and giving a silent nod right after.

Sota is the last one. But when I lock eyes with the man who was essentially a father to Hana for years, and he slowly dips his chin and grins at me…

Pretty sure that means I just passed some sort of test.

Sitting here, her hand in mine, a strange feeling settles over me. Like I've found my place. Like there's nothing I'd rather do than hold her hand, for as long as she'll let me.

The evening passes with a blur of voices and clinking glasses, one constant presence steadying me—Hana.

After dinner winds down we make our way upstairs, her arm looped tightly through mine as if she's afraid to let go. She's flushed and grinning from all the sake Sota's friends kept pouring, and when looks at me mischievously, my blood runs a little hotter.

We're barely inside her room before she pounces. I groan as she pushes me against the door, kissing me deeply. Fire roars through my veins, my cock turning to steel against her stomach as I grip her ass tightly.

"How about *you*," she half-slurs, "go shower." She grins a tipsy, sultry smile as she brings her lips to my ear. "*And then come back and tie me up*."

Okay, she's drunk. But whatever reservations I have slip away when she cups my swollen dick through my pants and leans close again.

"Don't you dare say no because I've been drinking," she purrs. Her teeth nip my earlobe. "*I* want *you to take advantage of me…"*

Fuck.

My cock surges against the front of my pants.

Hana giggles, slips away from me, and nods to the bathroom. "Off you go. Don't be long."

It's possible I set a new land speed record for quickest rinse-off. Still, when I step out of the bathroom, *sans* towel, my hunger abates.

Hana's curled up in bed, fast asleep.

It’s not a “wake me up with your cock” kind of sleep. Not a “take advantage of me” sleep.

It’s a true “the ship has sailed” passed out.

Her breaths are deep and even, her lashes casting faint shadows across her cheeks. She looks so peaceful and vulnerable, in a way I rarely see.

I reach for the covers, pulling them over her, tucking her in. She stirs, murmuring something, her lips pouting slightly.

“I fell asleep,” she mumbles, barely awake, her tone both regretful and apologetic. “I’m sorry.”

I run a hand through her hair, kissing her cheek. “Don’t be.”

Slowly she peels her eyes halfway open. She glances at the space beside her. The sad look in her eyes tightens my chest.

We’re still not sharing a bed. No matter how close we’ve gotten, how many barriers we’ve smashed, there’s still one she can’t cross. But I understand. It isn’t the kind of thing she can just undo, like untying a knot. It’s buried deep in her brain, beyond words, beyond reason.

She sighs, the faintest frown twisting her mouth. “I… I don’t want to be this way. I hate it. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” I say softly. I’m not letting this be one more thing she beats herself up over.

I grab a pillow and spare blanket from the armchair in the corner, setting up a makeshift bed on the floor next to her. I lie down, looking up at her as I spread out the blanket.

“This okay?” I ask, reaching for her hand.

Her fingers slip into mine and she squeezes.

“I think… This works,” she whispers softly.

A minute later, she’s breathing rhythmically.

But I stay awake.

I can’t bring myself to let go of her hand. I lie in the silence, staring up at the ceiling, my mind racing.

How the fuck did I end up here? Despite all the chaos, somehow I landed here—next to her. After a life spent knowing only the brutal edges, navigating the shadows, now there’s…her. Breaking through every fucking wall I’ve ever built.

I’m tired of pretending I’m not grateful for it. Her hand tightens around mine in her sleep, and it sends a warm, steadying, addictive jolt through me. Not calm, exactly—more like a barely-contained storm.

And no one’s going to take that away.

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26

HANA

"I CAN SEE IT NOW," Miyamoto beams.

He raises his hands like a film director framing his shot as he turns toward the large windows overlooking Tokyo's Marunouchi neighborhood, the *de facto* business district, named "inside the circle" for its location within the Royal Palace's outer moat.

"Meeting room here…all glass walls, naturally. It would be a crime to block that view."

I walk through the halls of the new office building, Miyamoto's voice fading as he stays with Kai by the windows, discussing renovations. I smile as I glance around.

This place is *perfect*. Maybe in need of some serious renovations. But Miyamoto was right: the potential is enormous. Five floors of *prime* office space in a perfect location, with a huge warehouse space in the basement attached to a garage, plus trucking bays and a separate truck entrance.

My pulse skips as I run my hand along a wall. This is the future of Mori Holdings, the start of our expansion into Tokyo. First the corporation, helmed by me. Then Kenzo can come in with the more *underground* business involving the Mori-kai empire. My veins buzz with excitement.

Suddenly, a chill ripples up my spine. I get the sensation I'm being *watched*. My heart leaps into my throat, a shadow flitting through my peripheral vision. But when I whirl…

Nothing.

Every nerve is still alive, though. I catch a glimpse of my reflection in a dusty window before turning, letting my gaze travel slowly over the open space.

There's nothing here. Nobody except for Kai and Miyamoto back in the main office space, and me over here, freaking out like a paranoid lunatic.

Breathe.

Miyamoto gives us a tour of the upper floors before we head to the basement via a staircase down from the main floor. The dark, cavernous space stretches out around us, with rows of truck bays, warehouse shelving, and a big garage door with street access.

"I know your focus is on Mori Holdings," Kai murmurs. "But this space, when the *rest* of the empire expands into the city?" He whistles. "This is big, Hana."

I wince as I think about next quarter's balance sheet for Mori Holdings.

"It came with a big price tag, too," I mumble. "But…"

"But it's going to be worth it," Kai grins. He claps a big hand on my shoulder. "You did good, Hana. Kenzo's going to be so proud of you."

I feel my face heat, and I grin.

"I'm going to find a working bathroom," I say, heading back to the same wrought iron stairs we used to get down here. Just as I reach the bottom of them, the door at the top kicks open.

My heart stops, a gasp dying in my throat and cold fear shooting up my spine as a man in black looms over me in the doorway.

"This is Ishida-kai territory," he says, his voice sharp. "Consider this your eviction notice."

He lifts his foot and kicks a canister strapped with wires down the stairs.

Oh God…

Instinct takes over.

“*BOMB*!!!” I scream, turning and sprinting across the floor. Kai and Miyamoto whirl toward me in surprise. When Kai looks past me, he springs into action.

“MOVE!” he roars, turning and shoving Miyamoto behind a concrete wall. He whirls and bolts toward me, catching me hard around the waist and yanking me behind a pillar just as the world turns to liquid fire.

The sound is deafening—pure thunder inside my head. The explosion slams through the basement, sending a wall of heat out ahead of it that singes my hair as Kai covers me behind the pillar.

The air becomes thick with smoke, the blast wave rattling my bones. My ears ring, my vision blurs. But when Kai yanks me to my feet, my limbs start to work again.

“Let’s *go*!” Kai roars, dragging me after him as he hurtles across the room. I follow, forcing my legs to pump as fast as his as I look around in horror.

There’s fire *everywhere*: orange liquid dripping off the walls and ceiling beams, consuming everything. My heart pounds, and my throat is dry as the inferno closes in on us.

I follow Kai to where he shoved Miyamoto. The older *Oyabun*’s eyes are wide, wild, his face pale.

“It’s Kolya!” he screams.

Kai’s face is grim as he scans the room before he sees something through the smoke.

“This way!” he roars, pulling Miyamoto to his feet and grabbing my wrist. “Let’s go, now!”

The three of us stumble across the basement, dodging fire and debris as it falls from the ceiling. I have no idea where we’re going until the smoke suddenly clears a little, giving me a glimpse of a beaten-up van parked in the corner.

There’s shouting behind us, shadows following through the smoke.

We’re being hunted.

Kai’s already in the driver’s seat, ripping into the dashboard. I tear open the back door, bundling Miyamoto inside before scrambling in after him. Kai is focused, tension in his jaw as he yanks wires out of the dashboard and touches them together, making them spark.

The van roars to life, headlights cutting through the thick smoke.

“*Fuck yes*,” Kai hisses. He glances back at us. “Hold on.”

I scream as the side of the van is suddenly peppered with thuds, the back window shattering. Gunfire erupts over the sounds of the roaring flames as Kai whirls back around, shifts into drive, and guns the engine.

Bullets ping off the van’s sides as Kai floors it, tires squealing against concrete as he jerks the wheel around, slams the gas pedal, and tears through the warehouse toward the only exit.

The flames are everywhere, the building nothing but a thick blanket of smoke and red-orange heat. Another shot shatters the passenger window, spraying glass everywhere. Miyamoto lets out a yell, clutching his arm, blood seeping through his fingers.

“Hold on!” Kai roars, heading straight for the garage door, teeth bared, focus unbreakable.

I brace for impact, clutching the seat as the van slams through the door. My teeth rattle, the metal crunches and groans, and then—we’re through.

We burst onto the street, tires smoking as Kai speeds away, leaving the inferno behind us.

* * *

THE HOTEL SUITE FEELS HEAVY, as if the walls themselves are absorbing the weight of what just happened. Damian’s arms are around me, grounding me after the chaos we just fled. His grip is strong, unyielding, and for a moment, I let myself sink into his solid warmth, reminding myself that I’m alive, unharmed.

“I'm okay," I whisper to him, feeling his gaze sweep over me, checking for any sign of injury.

I really am. My nerves are on edge, buzzing from the adrenaline still coursing through me, but physically I’m unharmed. Kai is, too.

In the chair across from me, Miyamoto sits with a pained expression, nursing his wounded arm. Blood from the broken glass seeps through the makeshift bandage, staining the fabric, but he barely seems to notice. His mind is elsewhere—back in that building, in the thick smoke, the fire licking up the walls and reducing everything to ash.

Across the room, Kenzo’s face fills the screen of the laptop set up on the coffee table, a dark, cold expression on his face that only appears when something goes very, very wrong. And something has. We all know it, but saying it aloud feels like bringing it further into dark reality.

“Building’s a write-off,” he says at last, voice rough, eyes downcast. “I just got off the phone with the Tokyo Fire Marshall. Total structural failure.” He sighs heavily, looking up with a tight, almost regretful expression. “There’s insurance, of course, but…” He exhales. “Yeah.”

Miyamoto lifts his eyes to me, remorseful. “I should never have pushed you to get that space,” he mutters, shaking his head. “I didn’t imagine Kolya would ever hit back with such force…”

His voice trails off.

“We should have seen it coming,” Takeshi snaps in the silence that follows, his eyes blazing. He’s pacing, radiating a fury that fills the room with dark heat. “We never hit back after they came for us at Miyamoto’s house. We let them walk away, they got bold, and now we’re dealing with this.” He turns to level a vicious look at the whole room. “We *need* to hit back this time,” he growls, his voice edged with a dangerous hunger for revenge. He turns to look at Kenzo on the laptop. “We fucking *have to,* Kenzo.”

Miyamoto nods, lips pressed to a grim line. “Kolya’s playing his hand too boldly now,” he says, looking around at each of us. “I agree with Takeshi. Time for a reprisal.”

Mal’s face appears on the laptop screen, fierce and unyielding. “I’m also with Tak,” he says, his voice sharp as a drawn blade. “This can’t go unanswered.”

I feel the eyes of the room on me, wanting to know what I think. I keep my gaze focused on Kenzo, the one who I know sees the whole board and the long game, even in a crisis moment like this. His expression is unreadable, but I see the storm in his eyes, the calculated rage simmering there.

“Kenzo,” I say cautiously, “I’m not sure we’re ready for open war in Tokyo. Not yet.”

He considers me for a moment, silent. Then he nods, his voice is laced with warning. “Unfortunately, Hana, war doesn’t look to be waiting for us to be ready,” he says softly. “And we *do* need to hit back.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Damian’s slight nod, his gaze focused and resolute.

“War isn’t something we can just dodge,” he murmurs, his voice dark and unwavering. “Not anymore.”

The words hang in the air, a heavy finality to them.

Kenzo’s attention shifts to Takeshi. “You want to take the lead on this?” he asks, his voice low.

Takeshi’s eyes flash with dangerous eagerness. “With pleasure,” he growls, a sharp edge to his voice that sends a chill through me. This isn’t just about business for him. This is a chance to make a statement.

To draw blood.

Kenzo nods, already assessing our options, the risks, the rewards.

“Get me a list of potential targets,” he growls. “Then we fire back. See how Kolya likes it.”

Damian’s grip tightens around me.

“Just so we’re clear,” he growls quietly. “You’re no longer allowed to leave my fucking *sight*.”

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27

DAMIAN

KAI, Takeshi and I stand in the park across the street from one of Tokyo's most-visited hostess clubs.

Or, more accurately, what *was* one of Tokyo's most visited hostess clubs.

Something tells me its popularity might dip a little, starting tonight. What with it being *on fucking fire* and all.

I smile grimly as I watch the flames tonguing up the walls, devouring the building like it's a snack, each floor lit up in a wave of scorching red and orange. There's supreme satisfaction watching something that belonged to Kolya Ishida turn to ash after the shit he pulled today.

My jaw tightens.

I don't give a fuck about his *message*. Or the building he torched. I do give a serious fuck that Hana could have been badly hurt.

She could have *died*. And for that reason alone, what happened earlier is not going unanswered.

Next to me, Takeshi stands with his arms crossed, his face illuminated by the blaze, a savage grin on his face as he watches it all go up. Kai's a quiet shadow beside him as he flicks his Zippo and deftly lights a cigarette.

"Job well done, boys," Takeshi mutters, his voice rough. He doesn't look at us; his eyes are still fixed on the inferno, pride radiating off him like heat. "Job *well* fucking done."

I nod grimly. Kai exhales a thin plume of smoke, his expression calm as ever. But there's a faint smirk on his lips as he regards the flames.

Takeshi chuckles darkly. "Kolya wanted a war. Well, he's got one."

* * *

I STOP at the hotel to make sure Hana is safe. She's sleeping when I get there, so I kiss her softly, not wanting to wake her. I double-check that the five guards I have watching the suite, the ten men patrolling the hallways and the roof, and the dozen more in the lobby are good and sharp.

Then I have business to attend to.

Tokyo's night air is cold against my skin as I scale the wall surrounding the US Ambassador's residence. Getting in is surprisingly easy: the guards move in predictable rotations, and the security systems themselves are slightly outdated.

I easily dodge the patrols and climb a lattice of ivy to a second-floor balcony. I slip inside the house itself, moving silently, with purpose.

I want fucking answers.

The massive residence is tastefully decorated with old-world, moneyed elegance. From down the hall, I hear the faint hum of voices. I follow the sound, every sense locked in.

Inside the sweeping library, the Donahues sit together, sipping wine and watching the news like they're untouchable, like they haven't destroyed lives and stayed clean doing it.

Tonight, that illusion is going to shatter.

Their backs are to me as I step closer, my *katana* sliding free with a cold, lethal snick that fills the room.

Judge Donahue lets out a startled, choked gasp as she and her husband snap their heads around to face me, their expressions morphing from shock to pale, horrified realization.

I press the blade to Josh's father's throat, just hard enough to show him that I'm not here for games.

"W-whatever you want," he bleats. "Take it! There's cash in the safe in the bedroom, jewelry. All yours, just—"

"I don't give a fuck about your *things*," I growl. I smile coldly as I twist the hilt, letting the very tip of the blade dance lightly over Kempton Donahue's jugular. The smallest bead of red appears on his skin before slowly dripping down to his collar.

I lean closer, my voice a razor-sharp whisper. "Your son hurt someone I care about deeply. And *you*—" I drag the blade closer, feeling his skin twitch under the edge. "You hurt her just as badly."

The blood drains from his face, his hands rising in surrender. "Look, let's… Let's be reasonable—" he stammers.

I cut him off with a glare. "Too late for that. Explain yourself now, or I start opening veins." I press the blade against his skin, making him flinch.

"I—I don't know what you mean," he says, his voice wavering.

My smile curls venomously. "I know everything, *Senator*," I growl. My eyes drag over to his wife. "*Your Honor*," I sneer as her face goes white. "Your son tried to rape a girl. And instead of helping her, or apologizing, or leaving her the fuck alone," I snarl, "you *blackmailed her*."

"Blackmail?!" Judge Donahue blurts shrilly. "That little bitch's psycho brother *murdered* our—!"

She shrieks as I grab her by the hair and yank her off the couch. Her husband starts screaming too when I drag her across the floor and press my blade to her throat.

"*Speak of her that way again*," I hiss through clenched teeth, my vision already red, "and I'll go to work on your face like a fucking butcher. Nod if you understand."

The Honorable Judge Donahue nods quickly.

"*Now then*," I snarl.

“I—I can pay back the money!” Senator Donahue blurts. “Tonight!”

I level a cold look at him. “Yes, you will.” My mouth twists. “Out of curiosity, why did you stop shaking her down every year?”

Senator Donahue hesitates. I pull the blade away from his wife and in two strides I’m in front of him, shoving him to his knees, the *katana* resting against his jugular again.

“*Speak*,” I snarl coldly.

“I was convinced to stop!” he yelps. “Look, I did a lot of good with that money! I used it to get elected! She came from a criminal family, and I thought it was…justice, you know? I used that money to finance my campaigns, to do good. *Do you know how much good I’ve done*?” he screams, his voice self-righteous.

“You think extortion is *good*?” My grip on the hilt tightens.

“No, I…listen,” he says, gesturing vaguely. “I’m sorry, truly. I made mistakes, but I was trying to do the right thing.”

“Funny, I have a hard time seeing blackmail that way,” I spit back.

His wife cuts in, “But… Think of his career, of the things he’s accomplished! That was *mafia* money. Blood money! We used it to get into a position to help people—”

“You used it to torture Hana for years with the memory of what your fuckhead son did to her,” I growl. I drag my eyes back to Josh’s dad. “*Who* convinced you to stop.”

He gulps weakly. “One of Josh’s friends. He worked for me; inner circle type stuff. A little over a year ago, when the rumors started that I might get tapped for the Ambassador position here in Tokyo…” He lifts his shoulders. “Ed convinced me it was unwise to continue coming to her for money.”

I don’t blink. “That why you fired him?”

Donahue gasps. “No! No, of course not. Poor boy had a drug and gambling problem, and it was seriously affecting his work. I fired him, yes, but I also tried to send him to rehab, on my dime.”

I nod slowly. “So what happened when he threatened to start telling people it was blackmail money financing your campaigns?”

I’m just spit-balling here. But it turns out my hunch was right.

Donahue’s face goes sheet-white. His eyes dart to his wife before he looks back at me, looking guilty as *sin*.

“I—I don’t know what you’re—”

“Is that why you killed him?” I press. “Keep him quiet?”

“Please…” Senator Donahue wails. “Please, let me just—”

“Let’s talk about the video,” I growl, my tone ice-cold. “The one of your son and his little friends torturing Hana. The one of your little darling trying to *rape her* while she screamed and begged him to stop.”

Something breaks in Judge Donahue’s face. She cups a hand to her mouth, horror in her eyes as she looks away.

But her husband’s face is a mask of confusion and genuine ignorance. “V-video?” he stammers. “Oh *God*, there’s a fucking *video*?”

I study him, the desperation in his eyes.

“I know you sent it to her, Senator,” I growl. “On the iPad.”

Judge Donahue looks sick as she whirls on her husband. “Kempton,” she blurts, horrified. “Did you send her a *video* of what he did to her? I didn’t even know—”

“Neither did I, Blythe!” he replies, his face lined and white. “I never sent her anything!” He spins back to me, genuine fear on his face. “I swear to whatever you hold holy,” he insists. “I didn’t send that girl anything!”

My mouth thins.

“Think about it!” he begs. “Right now, my son’s death is viewed as a tragic accident. What he did that night has never seen the light of day. If I knew there was *video evidence* of his crime?” He shakes his head. “I’d have destroyed every damn frame of it. Not sent her a copy.”

Well, fuck. He's got a point.

"*Please*," he whispers. "*Please*. I made a horrible mistake. I was angry, and I was so, *so* broken up about my son. I knew he'd done something unforgivable, but he was still *my son*. I know I handled it badly—threatening that poor girl, taking from her…"

He looks up at me. "If you'll let me, I'd like to make it up to her. To Hana. I've done wrong, and I truly want to make amends."

I stare at him keenly. "What are you saying?"

"I'll pay back every cent I took from her." He pauses. "And I'd like to…" He glances at his wife, then drags his eyes to me. "Sweeten the deal, so to speak."

My eyes glint. "Excuse me?"

"May I?" He starts to stand. I nod, backing away as he and his wife get to their feet. "Look," Senator Donahue sighs. "What are you, Yakuza?"

"Bratva," I growl. "But allied with the Mori-kai Yakuza."

He nods. "Well, let me explain to you how government works." He smiles wryly. "It's corrupt. Always. And the way to get good things done is to align yourself with the right 'wrong' people."

My brows lift. "You want to ally yourself with *my* organization."

The Senator smiles. "Would it be so bad? It could be win-win. As Ambassador, I'll have a decent amount of influence on the Japanese government—on their policies regarding organized crime, for example. Or sentencing maximums."

Christ, what a corrupt fuck. At the same time, he's right.

This *could* be win-win. Bigtime, too.

"What, precisely, would you want from me in exchange of this… *influence*?"

"Information on those you consider enemies." He shrugs. "I'll be seen as cleaning up the streets by helping to shut down certain organizations…" He

lifts a significant brow. “While quietly allowing *other* organizations…shall we say…*carte blanche*?”

My God. I hate that I’m even considering this. But he *does* have a point.

“You think this buys my forgiveness?”

“I think it’s a start,” he says, a faint smirk on his lips. “Plus this.” He turns and walks to a desk in the corner. He opens a drawer, pulls out checkbook and pen, and makes it out.

“Here.” He strides back to me and hands me the check.

Fuck me. That’s…a *lot*.

“You’ll note I left the recipient blank. Keep it for yourself,” he shrugs, “or she can cash it personally, or pump it back into her family’s organization. Up to you.”

I glance again at the massive check before I fold it up and slip it into my pocket.

“What do you say…” Senator Donahue frowns. “I’m sorry, I missed your name.”

“Damian,” I mutter.

He smiles. “Damian. Do you think we have a deal?”

“We might,” I say quietly. “It’s not my decision.”

“But you’ll bring it to those whose decision it is?”

I suck on my teeth, eying him. Donahue is clearly a self-serving opportunistic *shit*. But that plays in my favor right now.

“I will,” I growl.

He beams, clasping his hands together. “Excellent!” he cries. “Truly excellent!”

He chuckles as he turns to refill their wine glasses and pour one for me. Josh’s mom walks over and hands me mine.

“A toast?” she says hopefully, smiling. “To a mutually beneficial new relationship here in Japan?”

“I’ll bring the offer to my uncle,” I murmur. “That’s all I can promise.” I turn to level a hard look at Donahue. “You should know, if I bring this to Hana, and she wants you dead…” I smile as his face pales. “That’s what will happen.”

He chuckles nervously. “Well, here’s hoping. Cheers,” he blurts, tapping his glass to mine.

“*Na zdoroviehe*,” I growl, taking a sip.

“You know, Damian,” Donahue smiles. “I’m glad you broke in tonight. This could be a real opportunity for all of us. I mean, that’s the reality in Tokyo. The Yakuza runs it. You have to play with them if you want to play at all.”

I grin. “Cost of doing business.”

“Exactly!” he says. “Exactly true.”

“What did you say your organization was, Damian?” Judge Donahue asks with a polite smile. “Bratva, allied with the Mor-kai Yakuza?”

“Nikolayev Bratva,” I grunt. “My uncle Kir runs it.”

I frown to myself. Why did I volunteer that so easily?

“Yes, I’ve heard of him!” Donahue nods. “A real fighter, your uncle. Powerful.” He grins. “If he also wants to talk alliances… I’m always listening.”

“Listening to what,” I chuckle. “Rock ’n’ roll? Or are you more of a hip hop guy?”

A giggle ripples from my throat at the hilarious concept of this man listening to ultra-aggressive rap.

The frown creases my brow again.

What the fuck is so funny—

The wine glass drops from my hand.

The room starts to swim a little, gravity encouraging me in various directions. I drop to one knee, bracing myself against the floor as I grit my teeth. I drag my swimming gaze to Donahue, brow furrowing.

“What…the…fuck…”

I fall forward, my face hitting the carpet as I roll onto my back, groaning. I can’t move—can’t lift my arms, can’t kick my legs, can barely keep my eyes open.

I am, however, dimly aware of another person entering the room.

A tall man with pulled-back silvered hair and piercing blue eyes, wearing an expensive gunmetal gray suit with a blood red and black *montsuki* kimono over it.

A man with Slavic features and a Japanese last name.

Kolya Ishida.

Donahue sighs, batting his eyelashes as he leans over me. “Yes, Damian, I’m afraid the sad reality is that you have to play with the Yakuza if you want to play at all in this town.”

My vision blurs and dims, growing darker and darker…

“Unfortunately,” he sighs, “I’ve already picked a team.”

And everything fades to black.

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28

HANA

By mid-morning, my thoughts are a jumble. By noon, I'm a fucking *mess*.

Damian is missing.

Cold panic has settled in, making my chest tighten with every passing second. He isn't answering any messages. There's been no sign of him since last night, no trail to follow.

Just…vanished, into thin air.

I feel like I'm going insane. My mind won't stop seeing his face, replaying every intense moment we've shared. The way he looks at me like I'm something he needs. Something precious.

It's not even a question anymore. What I feel for this man… It's nothing I've ever known before. A feeling with a particular word I've never used with anyone outside my family. And I don't know how it happened, or what it means for the future, but I do know this:

Somehow, I fucking fell in love with Damian. And I won't lose him.

I'm pacing the hotel room, waiting for Kai to report back on his search of the city, when I glance to Takeshi, a grim expression on his face.

"We burned Kolya's hostess club. Damian mentioned he had to 'take care of something big' right afterward. Those were his exact words." He glances at me and makes a face. "I…sort of thought…you know…" He trails off, uncomfortable.

“You thought he meant what?!” I press, my heart pounding.

“I thought he was making a gross euphemism about hooking up with you!” he groans, his mouth twisting in disgust, frustration in his eyes. “Clearly, I was wrong.”

Just then Kai walks in, his face as grim as Tak’s. “Nothing. I mean, it’s a huge goddamn city, but we’ve checked every place he could be. It’s like he’s just disappeared.”

I shut my eyes, trying not to fall apart. This is Damian. He doesn’t *just disappear*.

My phone rings and I scramble to answer, seeing that it’s Freya on FaceTime. Both families were apprised of Damian’s disappearance this morning when I woke up to see no trace of him. Freya, hacker queen that she is, has been trying to triangulate and track his position from cell tower data.

“Anything?” I blurt anxiously.

Her face is grim. “Not yet,” she says tightly, her voice strained. “Tokyo’s *massive*,” Freya continues. “Signals get lost in the city’s data mess. I’ve been looking for a social media account pinging his phone or a web cookie trying to scrape him for ad data, but there’s nothing. His phone must be off.”

“Off?” I cling to my own phone like it might pull Damian back to me.

Freya nods, frowning. “There is one thing I’m not supposed to be tapped into…well, a *bunch* of stuff I’m not really supposed to be tapped into…but anyway, I just saw an internal report from the State Department about a possible break-in last night at the US Ambassador’s residence in Tokyo?”

I frown. “You think Damian broke into it?”

She huffs out a breath. “Not really, but it struck me as—off. Dunno. Could be worth digging into. I just have a weird feeling. Anyway, I’m jumping back in. Call you back if I snag anything.”

When we end the call, I turn to see Takeshi standing there, his face hard.

“What?” I demand, a little too sharply.

He clears his throat and glances at Kai, his expression inscrutable. “Could you…”

Kai nods without any protest before he turns and leaves us, stepping out of the room.

“That might be our lead,” Tak murmurs. “I think that was Damian.”

I stare at him. “Why the *fuck* would Damian break into the Ambassador’s house?”

Takeshi hesitates before answering. “The new Ambassador isn’t just anyone, Hana.” His voice drops. “He’s Kempton Donahue.”

The name hits me like a physical blow. I feel my knees buckle, my hand instinctively reaching out to steady myself against the wall.

“*What*?”

“As of a month ago. He’s serving out his Senate term, but he’s already in Tokyo.”

My heart drops, my pulse thudding like lead in my veins. “Damian…*went* to them?” I whisper. All the pieces fall horribly into place, fear and anger and helplessness all swirling together.

“They…” my head swims. “Tak, they—”

“I remember,” he growls, his eyes narrowed. “I remember when those fucks came and harassed you after—”

“Tak,” I say quietly. My face falls, the color draining from it as I look up at him with a pained expression on my face.

“Hana?”

“There’s…more to it than that.”

It all falls out. I’ve never told anyone about the painting, and the money, and constant threats from Josh’s parents. Only Damian, just the other day.

But as the words just fall out of me, I watch my brother's face rampage through all manner of emotions: pain, anger, sympathy, sadness…until finally it settles on something cold, brutal, and venomous.

"We have to go—" I start, my voice wavering as I fight to control the vortex of emotions.

Takeshi stops me, his hand firm on my shoulder. "No." His voice is as cold and unyielding as the unnervingly icy expression on his face. "No, this one's all me."

"Takeshi—"

"*No*," he repeats, his tone steely, and I see a darkness in his eyes that sends a chill down my spine. "Those motherfuckers put you through hell, Hana," he hisses through clenched teeth. "This has been a long time coming. If Damian's missing because of them…" His hands clench. "Those bastards are due for a reckoning."

Every instinct screams to run, to fight, to do anything I can to bring Damian back. But I see the fierce determination in my brother's eyes, and I know he won't let me.

Takeshi heads for the door, giving me a hard look over his shoulder. "I'll get him back, Hana. Don't worry."

And then he's gone, leaving me with nothing but my frantic heartbeat and the crushing weight of helplessness.

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TAKESHI

KEMPTON DONAHUE'S young secretary bought my story about being a city trash inspector here for a last-minute meeting with the Ambassador *far* too quickly.

What can I say: I'm charming as *fuck* when I want to be.

Twenty minutes later, she's sitting me down in the Ambassador's office with a cappuccino, smiling at me as I grin back at her.

"Thank you *so much,* Miss…?" I raise a brow.

"Oh!" She blushes. "Just Yuki is fine," she says through a shy smile.

"Thank you, Yuki-chan," I grin with a wink.

She turns even pinker and scurries out the door, leaving me to wait for my prey.

The second she's gone, the charm drops. My darkness seeps back out of the crevices and cracks it slithered into.

Unsmiling, I scan the room, noting exits, entrances, and any surveillance. There's one camera facing the side door, opposite the one I was escorted in through. It's simple enough to walk over, keep out of sight of the lens, and reach up to yank out the wire.

I settle back into my chair, sipping Yuki's not-bad cappuccino as I glance around again.

Kempton Donahue's office reeks of money, the shelves full of leather-bound books and mementos, with photos of him and any remotely well-known politician you could think of plastering the walls.

The side door opens. He doesn't see me at first, his nose stuck in a file folder as he strolls in. "Ahh, Mr. Suzuki," he mumbles, still not looking at me as he walks around behind his desk. "How can I help—"

He finally glances up. His face drains of color, as if he's seen a ghost, but then a flicker of rage sparks in his eyes.

Recognition.

"*You*," he breathes.

Yeah, he knows exactly who I am and what I've done.

Good. Saves me the trouble of introductions.

I'm out of the chair and on him in three steps. Donahue bleats as I grab him by the collar and slam him down on the desk so hard the papers he was holding scatter like leaves. He barely manages a yelp before I've twisted his arm behind him, locked in a hold that has him helpless, his jowly cheek against the wood.

"You son of a bitch!" he roars. "You son of a—"

"*Quiet*," I snarl through clenched teeth, twisting his arm a little tighter. "Or I'll rip this arm off and fucking gag you with it."

He shudders, panting heavily as I bend down to glare at him.

"My friend was here last night," I spit, my face inches from his. "And he somehow didn't manage to find his way home afterward. Where is he."

"You piece of shit," he squawks, struggling against my grip. He's pinned. Pathetic. Weak, just like his shitty excuse for a son.

"You blackmailed my sister," I say, my voice a low, dangerous hiss, "after your son tried to rape her."

His face contorts in rage. "*You killed my son*!" he bellows, the veins in his neck bulging.

“That I did, Ambassador,” I smile as I lean down closer to him. “And you know what?”

He gulps.

“Go ahead. Ask me *what*.”

His eyes run over my face, flickering as he starts to truly understand what he’s dealing with.

Madness.

An attraction to violence and havoc.

A man who would literally rip his limbs off right now, and then go have a nice quiet lunch.

He swallows thickly. “*What*,” he chokes.

I grin savagely. “*I’d do it again*,” I whisper, venom seeping into my words. “And again, and again.”

Donahue keeps trying to wriggle out of my grip, squirming like a stuck pig. No. He’s not going anywhere.

“You think I’d tell you?!” he snarls. “You think I’d help you after what you did?!”

“See, that’s *exactly* what I think,” I smile, my hand tightening on his arm, bending it at an unnatural angle. He chokes out a scream as I force him harder against the desk, pressing my full weight on him.

“Tell me where Damian is,” I demand, my tone icy yet calm. “Or I’ll kill you, just like I killed your pathetic son.”

He freezes, his breathing ragged. I feel tension bleed through his body as the threat settles in. He starts to crack. Slowly, he lifts his head.

“I… I don’t know where he’s being held,” he whispers. “But I know who took him.”

My eyes narrow. “Start. Talking.”

Donahue looks away, defeated. Broken. “I’m…working with Kolya Ishida.”

It takes every ounce of control not to shatter his wrist right here. This scum, working with the Ishida-kai, pulling strings like he’s some puppet master. I tighten my grip on his arm, forcing him to look at me.

“Keep going,” I hiss.

His eyes flicker with fear. “Kolya…had a man who was spying on him once. I was there, I saw it.” He’s babbling, the words spilling out. “Kolya brought him to a warehouse near the harbor to torture him.”

I lean closer. “Where,” I breathe. “Be *very* specific.”

Donahue stammers out the address, his voice shaking with terror. “You’ll never get in there,” he cries. “M-Mr. Ishida’s guards—”

“Why don’t you leave the guards to me,” I mutter.

I already know how I’ll get to Damian.

…Because I know Kolya Ishida’s weak spot.

I release Donahue’s arm. But before I let him get up, I slip something from my jacket pocket and set it down next to his hand.

Donahue freezes as his eyes land on the small, ornate *tantō* knife. His face pales.

“No!” he cries, eyes wide with terror. “You said if I helped you—”

“I’d let you live, yes.” I let the words hang for a moment, watching hope flickering in his eyes. “But there’s still a price to pay. There’s *always* a price.”

I smile as the realization dawns on him. I point at the knife, then at his hand.

“The Yakuza have a ritual called *yubitsume*,” I say calmly. “When an offense is made, the offender cuts off the top portion of their pinky finger to ask for forgiveness.”

Donahue shakes his head, his entire body trembling. “No…no, I—”

“It’s the pinky or I slice open your fucking throat and you bleed out on the carpet,” I mutter, my voice a low growl. “You have ten seconds to decide.”

He stares at the blade, his pale face slick with sweat. After a pause, I start counting down from ten, my voice cold and unyielding.

“Ten. Nine…”

Donahue starts to tremble.

“Eight. Seven…”

His hand hovers over the blade as he wrestles with his fear.

“Six. Five. Four…”

He squeezes his eyes shut.

“Three…”

On two he takes the knife, his hand shaking so hard the blade rattles against the desk. He’s *crying* as he holds it to his pinky. It’s glorious.

“Hang on—”

I grab his tie and stuff it into his mouth.

“Proceed.”

He hesitates for a second, then slams down the blade.

A wet, sickening crunch fills the room, followed by his strangled cries as blood spurts from the cut.

“Yeah, no, it’s easier to aim for the knuckle,” I murmur quietly.

He sobs as he slides the blade lower and tries again, screaming into the tie as he hacks through his own flesh. More blood spurts as the pinky slices away, splattering across his papers, the pristine leather of his desk.

He’s a mess now, sobbing, clutching his maimed hand as blood starts to drip onto the floor.

I wipe the blade clean on his cheek before I stand, roll my neck, and walk around to the other side of the desk.

“Give it to me.”

He looks up at me, all sniveling snot and tears and blood. I nod to the severed finger.

He stares at me, horrified, but he knows better than to defy me now. Slowly, he picks up the pinky, his face twisted in agony, and hands it to me.

I take it, slipping it into my pocket like it’s nothing more than a business card.

“It goes without saying,” I murmur lethally, “if you’ve misled me here, I’ll be back to cut off the rest of your appendages.” I lean closer, my eyes flashing. “Then I’ll do the same to your wife.”

He doesn’t speak, doesn’t move.

I turn to leave, the severed finger in my pocket feeling like a trophy.

“Welcome to Japan, Ambassador Donahue.”

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DAMIAN

THE ACHE in my arms is a dull throb, a steady pulse of pain that matches the slow trickle of blood.

But it's nothing compared to the vicious, stabbing jabs of pain that come with every hit.

There are two of them. I suppose I should feel proud that they felt they needed more than one guy to fuck me up. But it's hard to feel anything when the two of them have been beating the shit out of me for the better part of half an hour.

I grunt as one of the two Ishida-kai enforcers rocks a left hook across my face. My head jerks to the side, blood exploding from my lip. The rest of my body doesn't really move: my wrists, ankles, and torso are all bound to the big wooden X-shaped cross behind me in the middle of the dark warehouse space.

…Not *exactly* the kind of bondage that gets me hard.

The second enforcer's fist follows, landing a big hit against my bruised, probably cracked ribs. I groan, more blood spilling from my mouth and dripping down my bare chest.

Another hit comes. Then another, and another. Suddenly, through the miasma of pain, I hear a voice—smooth, controlled, commanding.

"Enough."

I drag my head up, breathing in shallow, jagged gulps as the two men step away. Every inch of my body is screaming, bruises throbbing, blood running sticky and warm down my chest. The dull thud of footsteps brings my focus forward, and I see the man entering the room.

He has an air about him that could quiet a storm—controlled lethality wrapped in brutal elegance. His eyes are sharp, the color of stormy water, and his dark hair, streaked with silver, is pulled back. The very air in the room shifts around him, bows in his presence.

He's in gunmetal gray three-piece suit, a black and blood-red *montsuki* kimono draped around him like a shogun. His shoulders are broad and strong, his arms thick, and I can see tattoo ink at the neck of his one-button-undone shirt.

The corners of his mouth lift in almost polite acknowledgment, but his gaze is as cold as a winter wind. He stops a few feet away, his head cocked slightly.

"Damian Nikolayev." Kolya Ishida's voice is low and smooth, but it slices over my skin like glass. "Welcome."

He says it like I'm a visitor he's invited here, not a man strung up in a grotesque display. A flicker of amusement dances in his eyes as he steps closer with predatory calm.

"I suppose you know why you're here."

I hold his gaze, not giving him the satisfaction of an answer.

His smile widens, but it's all in the mouth; his eyes are still hard and calculating. "Ah, yes, the famous Bratva pride." He turns and spits on the ground. "You've been quite a nuisance, Mr. Nikolayev. You and the Mori-kai, and your absurd *insistence* that you somehow belong in this city."

"I'm here because you're scared of a little competition, then," I growl, forcing the words out despite the dry, bitter taste in my mouth.

He chuckles a dark, gravelly sound. "Hardly." He steps closer, his gaze sharp and cold. "Allow me to rephrase. You're here, Mr. Nikolayev, because you are a *pest*. A disease. A virus that requires eradication."

Kolya's hand drops to his side, and my eyes fall on the *katana* he's carrying. The scabbard gleams, intricately polished wood with gold inlay. He draws it slowly, the blade catching the dim light with a deadly shimmer.

A thing of beauty, designed to end lives.

"This sword," he murmurs almost reverently, his eyes on the blade, "was passed down from my great-great-grandfather. The art of folding steel is truly magnificent. It takes layers upon layers to make something this strong. This sharp. This lethal." He lets the words sink in, his fingers brushing the flat of the blade like a lover's caress.

"It's been in my family for generations," he continues. "And when I came back to Japan, I claimed it from my grandfather." His eyes lock onto mine with a glint that sends a chill down my spine. "He was the first person I killed with it—punishment for casting out my mother. It's so old, and yet…" He sighs almost wistfully. "Still so sharp."

He draws closer, power radiating off him in waves.

Without warning, the blade slices across my shoulder, and I feel stinging white-hot pain as it parts flesh, sending blood down my arm. I grit my teeth, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a response.

Kolya smiles icily as his wrist flicks again. The blade slashes across my ribs on the opposite side. A fresh wave of pain and blood spills from my body as I groan tightly.

"Do you know how much blood a man can lose before he dies?" Kolya muses, twisting the blade to let the crimson drip down. "A surprising amount. Close to two liters—that's half a gallon to you." He smiles. "*Forty percent* of what a grown man has inside him, Mr. Nikolayev, before he would succumb to *exsanguination*, or death by loss of blood."

Another slash, this time across my stomach, shallow enough to sting and deep enough to bleed. He's taunting me, testing me.

I don't break. I stare him down, letting the pain become part of me, a reminder that I'm still here, still alive.

Another cut opens my bicep. This time, I focus on something else to drive away the agony.

Hana.

Her lips. Her touch. Her kiss. The way she smells, and how she looks at me.

The man she makes me want to be.

Kolya's gaze narrows, sensing a challenge. He leans close enough that I can see the small scar across his cheek. "You're going to make me enjoy this, aren't you," he murmurs, almost admiringly.

"*Fuck…you…*" I manage, my voice raw but steady.

He grins, white teeth flashing in the shadows. "Good. I like a fighting spirit, Mr. Nikolayev. For all our differences, it's a good way to die: defiant!"

He lifts the blade again, and I brace myself, but the door behind him swings open before the next strike comes.

Ryu, the man I met at the gala, strides in, bowing low. "*Ishida-san*, there's been an incident."

Kolya's grip on the blade tightens, face twisting with irritation. "I'm busy, Ryu."

Ryu leans closer, lowering his voice. "There's a fire, sir. At *her* house."

Kolya's expression changes in an instant. Something dark and intense flickers in his gaze, shifting from calm cruelty to barely concealed panic. Without another word, he wipes the *katana* off and sheathes it, casting one last look over his shoulder at me.

"Keep him alive," he commands his men. "I'm not done with him."

With that, he strides out the door, leaving me with Ryu and the guards. My breathing is ragged and my body is in agony, but I can't stop the faint smirk that comes to my lips.

Kolya, it would seem, has a weakness. I just don't know what—or who—it is yet.

Silence descends over the room before Ryu clears his throat. “Leave us,” he murmurs coldly. The two other guards nod, turning and stepping out of the room.

When we’re alone, Ryu smiles darkly and steps closer to me. Without warning, he brings his hand up, using a single finger to poke one of my bleeding wounds hard. I grit my teeth, groaning as the pain washes over me.

A cruel smile bleeds across his face.

“You were quite rude to me at our first meeting, Mr. Nikolayev.”

“How about I tell you how I fucked your mother before I send you away to eat a bag of dicks. We can pick up where we left off.”

Ryu’s lips curl slightly.

“Has Ishida-san told you yet about the samurai? He’s quite good with history, particularly the Edo period.”

He jams a finger into the wound on my stomach again, making me hiss in agony. Stars flicker in my vision as I bite back a scream.

“Has he told you about *seppuku*, Mr. Nikolayev? The ancient samurai ritual death by self-disembowelment. You’d cut across *here*—”

Without warning, he brings a blade out from behind him and slashes it across my stomach. I groan viciously as pain slams into me, blood flowing down my torso.

“Then—”

The lights go out.

A moment of silence follows, confusion blanketing the room. Ryu curses, yanking his phone out of his pocket and yelling for the guards. His phone illuminates his face and the gun he now holds in his other hand.

The guards rush in, also carrying sidearms. They close the door, surrounding Ryu as he backs closer to me.

“No one gets in,” he hisses at his men as all three of them aim their guns at the door.

It slams open without warning, crashing against the wall with enough force to rip it half off its hinges. A can tosses into the room.

Shit.

I squeeze my eyes shut as the flash grenade goes off like the surface of the sun popping in to say hello. Even with my eyes shut it's blinding, and I can hear Ryu and the other guards screaming in agony.

Before I can process it, I feel the ropes at my wrists slacken, a knife slicing through them precisely.

"Let's go, fucker," Takeshi's voice hisses in my ear.

I stumble, my legs screaming in protest, but Takeshi is there, unrelenting, hauling me to my feet as he drags me roughly past Ryu and the guards and out the door.

We move as fast as I'm able, Takeshi half-dragging me, slipping through the shadows, shouting and chaos echoing down the hall.

"What the hell did you *do*?" I grunt, wincing as pain flares with every step.

He grins wickedly. "You don't want to know."

We burst out onto a third-floor balcony, and I finally realize where we are—an old warehouse overlooking the train tracks, an open car passing beneath us, loaded with what looks like…and *smells like*…

My nose wrinkles…

Fish guts.

We're at the harbor near Tokyo's enormous fishing port.

Takeshi glances down, grimacing. "You're not going to like this," he says, almost apologetically. "If it helps, neither am I."

Gunshots ring out behind us, splitting the night. Bullets shred the wood of the wall next to us as Ryu and the two guards come charging around the corner.

We don't have a choice.

Takeshi grabs my arm and we leap off the edge, hurtling toward the rotting fish below as Kolya’s men shoot wildly, their shouts drowned out by the rush of wind and the pounding of my pulse.

We hit the car with a wet, revolting slosh. Takeshi grabs me, yanking me down into the stinking muck as bullets squelch and splatter around us.

The train keeps moving, pulling us away from the warehouse and around a bend, leaving the sound of gunfire and the fading shouts of the three men behind.

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HANA

My hands shake as I read Takeshi's text again.

TAKESHI

I got him.

Of course my heart is racing, excitement to think he's alive surging through me like pure adrenaline after the day of not knowing. Still, I don't know what *else* that means.

Is he hurt? *Badly* hurt?

The hotel suite is too quiet and empty, even with Kai sitting by the door. The room lights cast harsh, sharp shadows against the walls. I can't sit still. I pace back and forth, chewing on the inside of my cheek until I taste blood, my heart pounding so hard I feel it in every nerve and muscle.

Another minute passes, then another. Suddenly, the door opens with a soft beep, and I whip around, pulse spiking.

Oh fuck…

I freeze, breath caught in my throat, and then my body moves before my mind can catch up. I stumble forward, tears already blurring my vision as I rush to them.

Damian looks like *hell*. Bruises purple his face, blood smears down his bare chest, wounds still bleed freely. He's barely able to stand, legs dragging as Tak and Kai haul his large frame inside.

But he’s here. Alive.

Mine.

“*Oh my god…*” My voice is a broken whisper as I go to take him in my arms.

Takeshi’s face is tense as he throws out a hand to stop me. “Hana, give him a little—”

“*No*…” Damian snarls. His head lifts, his gaze locking onto me. And I see it in his eyes, that wild, desperate need. “No,” he chokes out, a rough, fractured growl. “Let her.”

Takeshi sighs but relents, moving aside so I can get closer. I slip under Damian’s arm, wrapping my hands around his waist for support as we guide him to the couch.

He looks like death. He and Takeshi *reek* of…something disgusting. I don’t care.

He’s here.

We reach the sofa and Damian collapses, his weight sagging into the cushions, his head falling back. His eyes shut for a moment, and fresh panic claws up my throat.

“*Damian*?” I whisper, smoothing back a strand of hair from his forehead. He opens his eyes, barely focusing on me, but… He’s here.

“I’m fine,” he manages, his voice strained, every inch of him battered and bruised. His hand reaches out, finding mine, and he holds on like he’s afraid to let go.

The tightness in my chest releases. Tears spill over, hot and unbidden. I lean in, pressing my forehead to his, my fingers trembling as I grip his hand. “I thought—” My voice breaks. “I thought I’d lost you.”

He squeezes my hand weakly, and I can feel the effort it takes. “You’re not…getting rid of me that easily, Kitsune…”

I choke out a laugh, even as fresh tears slip down my cheeks. His thumb brushes over the back of my hand, a small gesture, but enough to ground me and remind me that he's here.

The door opens again, and a team of medics rush in, their presence making reality crash back down.

"Miss, you need to step back, please," one of them says urgently.

"No, wait—" My grip tightens, but Damian's eyes drift closed, his face paling. Panic flares in me as his hand slips from mine and goes limp.

"Damian!" I scream, shaking his shoulder. He doesn't respond, his head lolling to the side as the medics swarm in, pushing me back.

"Miss, please. We need space to work."

My heart pounds painfully as Tak pulls me aside. The medical team blocks any view of Damian, and I'm left standing there, feeling useless, watching as they start assessing him, checking his vitals, calling out medical jargon that makes my stomach turn. It's like watching him slip away all over again.

Takeshi puts a hand on my shoulder, his face grim but calm. "He's in good hands. They'll take care of him."

I nod, trying to pull myself together. But my hands are still shaking, my mind racing with a thousand what-ifs. He looks so broken, so vulnerable.

The thought of losing him is unbearable.

The medics work quickly, pressing on his wounds, pulling bags of blood out of a cooler, pushing IV needles into his veins. I watch, every second stretching out, a torture of waiting, not knowing.

One of the medics finally looks over at me, his face softer. "He's stable now. But he needs rest. He's been through a lot."

I nod, relief washing over me, though the tension doesn't quite leave. Damian's still unconscious, his chest rising and falling shallowly. But he's alive. He's safe.

For now… That's enough.

* * *

CONSCIOUSNESS SEEPS back as my eyes slowly open in the darkness. The digital clock next to me reads midnight as I blink, stirring in the uncomfortable chair. I must have dozed off. My neck aches from the awkward position, but it all melts away when I see him.

Damian's eyes are open, bleary but focused, and he's looking right at me.

"Hey," I whisper, joy and relief filling me as I move to his bedside.

He's still battered and bruised, looking like he went to hell and back, but his gaze is clear, and there's that familiar spark in his eyes. He's here…really *here*…and for a second, I can barely breathe from happiness.

"How long was I out?"

"Just over twenty-four hours."

He blinks. "Fuck. Really?"

My lips twist. "Yeah." My throat bobs. "You were in…pretty bad shape," I whisper.

He smirks. "Well, I don't smell like fish gunk anymore. So there's that."

I laugh, the sound too loud in the quiet room, but I can't help it. I nod, reaching out to brush a hand across his arm. "I…may have given you a sponge bath."

He groans, his face twisting in mock outrage. "And I missed it? *Fuck*."

I giggle, leaning down to kiss him, pressing my lips softly to his, savoring the warmth and feel of him under me. It's so tender and achingly perfect that I can hardly stand it. I feel his hand lift and cup the back of my head as he deepens the kiss, drawing me close, like he's afraid I'll disappear.

I pull back, though it kills me to do it. "Your wounds," I whisper, heart clenching as I look at the cuts and bruises scattered across his chest.

His hand tightens on my back, his eyes darkening with that fierce intensity that's always both scared and thrilled me. "Fuck my wounds," he growls. "I

need you.”

He pulls me down and I don’t resist. Our mouths meet again, his kiss hungry, desperate. I luxuriate in his touch, grounding me and making me dizzy all at once.

All the exhaustion of the past day and the terror I felt when I thought I might have lost him surge to the surface at once and melt away now that he’s here, alive, beneath my hands.

He tilts his head, his lips grazing my neck, setting every nerve on fire. I forget about his cuts and bruises, lost in the feeling of his mouth against my skin, his hands steady and firm.

My breath catches as he pulls me on top of him, sliding my leg over his body.

“*Damian*…”

“I don’t need more rest, Kitsune,” he whispers. “Or to lie here in this bed waiting to feel better.”

I gasp as his hand slides between us, diving into the waist of my cotton sleep shorts and slipping under the elastic of my panties. His fingers slip deeper, and when he finds me wet and my clit swollen, he growls against my mouth.

“I just need *you*.”

He sinks two fingers into me, curling them deep against my g-spot. I moan eagerly, kissing him hungrily as he shifts his body under me, sliding me fully on top of him. I can feel his swollen cock, heavy, hot and hard against my thigh through his boxers.

My tongue dances with his as I reach between us as well, my fingers inching into the waist of his shorts to curl around his thickness.

Fuck. Just touching him, feeling how hard and ready he is for me, gets me even wetter. I whimper as I stroke him, feeling my pussy drip all over his fingers.

Damian groans when I pull away. But then I slide down between his legs and his eyes blaze, hungry and wild. I pull his boxers down, my eyes widening when his fat cock springs free, swollen and pulsing. I wrap my hand around him, stroking softly as I bring my lips to the head, kissing the underside.

"*Fuck*, Hana…" he groans, sliding his fingers into my hair and twisting it around his fist.

I whimper as I tongue the slit at the tip, tasting the salty sweetness beaded there before my lips part. I moan as I swallow him, taking him deep as he hisses in pleasure. His hands tangle roughly in my hair, giving me the thrill of feeling his control as I drool all over his cock.

I reach between my legs, pushing my shorts and panties down and kicking them off. I pull away from him just enough to get my t-shirt off over my head before he's yanking me up his body.

Our eyes lock as he fists his cock and grips my hip, centering me before he groans and pulls me down onto him. I cry out, moaning deeply, bending down to crush my mouth to his as I slide down on every thick inch of him until his balls are against my ass and my clit is grinding into him.

"Every inch, Kitsune," he grunts, thrusting up into me. I squeal as feel him grind so fucking deep, hitting places inside me that I never knew were there before him. "*Every. Fucking. Inch*."

"*So fucking big*…" I whimper, moaning and shuddering as I feel my walls clench around him, my body trembling with both the effort and the raw lust of feeling him so deep.

"Such a good little fuck-toy for taking that big cock, Kitsune," he groans. "Such a greedy little cumslut."

My mouth falls open, my eyes rolling back as I start to ride him. The raw sensation of sliding up every inch of his fat cock drives me insane, and when I sink back down and feel him ram up into me again, it's like I lose control of reality.

My hips roll, ass bouncing up and down on him. His powerful fingers dig into me, bruising my skin deliciously as he guides me up and down, lifting

me up to the crown and then sending me all the way down to his heavy balls with every thrust.

He sits up, his mouth wrapping around one of my nipples and sucking hard. I cry out, whimpering in pain and pleasure as he bites down, twisting it mercilessly in his mouth as my back arches and my body shudders.

Damian's mouth slides up to my neck, biting and sucking over my jaw and my chin before his mouth sears to mine. Our tongues dance, lips battling as I bounce harder and faster on him, rocking and grinding as the raw heat inside of me begins to swell and send me into oblivion.

I cry out when he grabs a fistful of my hair and yanks my head back, pulling my mouth from his, raking his teeth over my bottom lip. His mouth slips to my ear just as I feel myself begin to shatter.

"*I'm going to fill this pretty pussy with every fucking drop of my cum, Kitsune*," he hisses into my ear. "*I'm going to mark you with it until not a day or even a fucking hour goes by where you don't feel me leaking out of you.*"

Fucking *hell*. It's so dirty and hot that I lose all control instantly. My body spasms and writhes as I clench around him. My back arches violently as I choke on a silent scream of pleasure, grinding down hard on him.

And suddenly, I'm coming like a fucking *hurricane*.

Damian slams his mouth to mine, swallowing my moans as he rocks up into me. His swollen cock pulses and throbs, pumping rope after thick rope of his hot cum into me as my pussy clenches around him.

He collapses back with me on top of him, shivering and whimpering as I kiss his mouth, his jaw, his neck…wanting to taste every inch of his skin as I feel myself squeeze around him. Slowly, eventually, I slide off his thickness, gasping quietly when I feel the head slip out.

I roll off and curl up beside him, my head on his shoulder, just listening to his heartbeat under my ear. It's steady, grounding, a reassurance that he's here with me, that he's safe.

That's when I realize that I'm completely in love with this man.

Head over heels.

Hopelessly.

Embarrassingly.

I shift, looking up at him. He meets my gaze, his expression softening, and I can tell he knows.

He always knows.

“Mind if I sleep in the bed?” I ask softly, biting my lip.

His brows knit as he nods, starting to get up. “Sure, I’ll grab the floor—”

I reach out, stopping him with a gentle hand on his arm. “I meant…” My cheeks flush as I search for the words. “I meant, can I sleep in the bed *with you*?”

His expression changes, a soft and almost vulnerable mix of surprise and warmth flickering in his eyes that I rarely see. He pulls me closer, his arm wrapping around me as he presses a kiss to my forehead.

“You’re sure?” he murmurs quietly.

I nod, my hand finding his under the covers, our fingers intertwining. “I’m sure.”

It feels like the final piece falling into place, the last barrier between us crumbling away.

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HANA

IT'S BEEN three weeks since my brother pulled Damian out of Kolya's torture room and since the Ishida-kai's bold attack *wildly* accelerated Kenzo's timeline for moving into Tokyo.

Since then, Mori-kai forces have flooded the city. Some of the smaller families have already picked sides, with a few of them outright joining under the Mori-kai banner. Others have faded to the sidelines to watch when the war starts.

It hasn't yet, but it's matter of when—not if.

Battle lines have been drawn, dividing up the city as the criminal enterprises in Tokyo wait to see what happens when the Mori-kai and the Ishida-kai finally clash.

Because of this, we've all essentially been on lockdown for three weeks. Under some circumstances, that might really suck.

But for me, it doesn't.

Not. At. All.

Damian and I have left the Conrad Hotel and spent the last few weeks in the new penthouse apartment Damian ended up buying in the trendy Kabutocho neighborhood.

It's been three weeks of *heaven*, the two of us locked in together, forgetting that the rest of the world exists.

Mornings melt into late afternoons. We sleep in. We wake each other up with our mouths, or with me sliding down onto his morning erection. We make breakfast together. Damian fucks me on the counter or against the fridge.

I help him with his physical therapy and exercises.

…Then I usually make him come in my mouth or ride him on the weight bench until we both do.

Some days we scarcely get out of bed, completely wrapped up in each other as though the rest of the world doesn't need us. It's a fragile, beautiful illusion, this strange little world we've made.

But it's bliss.

I suck in a ragged breath of air, my body still trembling as I feel his hands slide up my arms. Damian's cock is still buried deep inside me as his fingers twine with mine against the headboard.

"*Fuck*, Kitsune…" he murmurs against my shoulder as we both try and catch our breath.

…I've mentioned that I *love* when he calls me that, right?

Slowly, still inside me, Damian unties the ropes binding my wrists to the headboard. When I'm free, I push back against him, not to push him away, but to enjoy the sensation of his cock filling me a bit longer.

I yelp, giggling when he bites my ear hard.

"*Greedy thing*," he growls quietly.

I bite my lip. "And?"

"*And*, keep it up and we won't be leaving this bed…"

I can feel him swell rock-hard again inside me, my pulse spiking.

…Which of course, is exactly when my phone rings. Worse, it's Kenzo.

Damian groans when he sees my brother's name, AKA, "do not ignore during a Yakuza lockdown", on the screen.

“*Fuck*,” he mutters.

I pout when he slides out of me but scramble to the bedside table to answer.

“Yeah?” I blurt into the phone.

Kenzo hesitates a minute.

“Are… Are you okay?”

“Yes?”

“You sound out of breath.”

For a second, I seriously consider scarring my brother.

“I’m…helping Damian with his PT,” I lie, glancing back at the devil himself, sitting back on his haunches with his thick cock springing up from between his muscled thighs.

I mean *fuck*, he’s hot.

“Well, take a break, because I’ve got good news.”

I freeze.

“Wait, are you lifting—”

“Not a total de-escalation,” he sighs. “But we’re officially on a reprieve with the Ishida-kai.”

“A reprieve?” I repeat, my brow furrowing as I clutch the phone a little tighter. “What does that mean?”

Kenzo sighs and I can practically see him rubbing the back of his neck as he chooses his words. “Kolya called me ten minutes ago, asking for a ceasefire. Not sure why, but it’s legit. For now, anyway. Again, I want to stress this doesn’t mean this is over. But we agreed to back down for the present, and to talk again before things resume. I have no fucking clue why he asked, but the fact that he did is enough for me to trust him, at least on this.”

I’m almost too stunned to speak. Kolya calling for a ceasefire makes zero sense. The Mori-kai might be hungry for a piece of Tokyo, but the Ishida-kai are a *very* well-armed and defended group, especially on their own home turf.

I’d never say it openly to Kenzo, but if it *did* come to war, I wouldn’t exactly bet on us.

But if Kolya’s offering a temporary halt to hostilities, we’d be fools not to take it.

I hang up and glance over my shoulder, seeing Damian sprawled across the bed, his attention on me.

He’s still hard.

Very, *very* hard.

He raises an eyebrow, his gaze simmering with dark curiosity.

“Ceasefire,” I explain, grinning.

His brows shoot up. “Seriously?”

“*Yup*.”

“What does that even mean?”

I grin. “It means we can go out. Like, literally out.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “You asking me on a date, Kitsune?”

“Fuck yeah,” I answer immediately, laughing and not caring how eager I sound. “Damian, we’ve barely left this place for three weeks. And we’ve *never* had a real date.”

“I mean, there was that dinner at Miyamoto’s house…”

I roll my eyes. “How about a date that *doesn’t* involve ninja assassins jumping out of the shadows.”

Damian grins a boyish smile that’s rare for him. “Okay,” he says, shaking his head. “We’ll go out. But first, there’s something very important we need

to do.”

I grin as he starts to prowl across the bed toward me.

“Oh?” I giggle. “What’s that?”

The only answer I get is him flipping me over, pinning me to the bed as he shoves my thighs apart and kissing his way between them from behind.

I mean…*great* answer.

* * *

LATER THAT NIGHT, after an amazing *omakase* dinner, we find ourselves stepping past the velvet rope of a super trendy, neon-lit nightclub in Roppongi.

Thudding club music pulses in the air, vibrating through my veins, and I feel like I’ve stepped into another dimension. It’s packed, the bassline thudding and moving the sea of gyrating dancers in a hypnotic rhythm.

It’s chaotic, but with Damian’s hand firmly around my waist, I feel grounded. Protected.

And then we’re on the dance floor, surrounded by people but somehow in a bubble of our own. Damian moves with unexpected natural ease, his body in perfect time with mine as we sway, the beat pulsing between us. My pulse races, every move syncing with his as we lock eyes. I can’t look away.

Okay, who knew. Damian can *seriously* dance.

The club music switches from a mix of your average bass-heavy club beats to something akin to salsa or a tango. I shriek as he grabs me, effortlessly spinning and dipping me, reeling me in close and then spinning me away.

I stop for a second, staring at him in disbelief. “The fuck?” I ask, breathless, a grin stretching across my face as I take in his effortless moves. “You can seriously dance. *How* is that possible?”

He smirks as he pulls me close. “Lessons.”

I arch a brow, smiling softly. “Your parents?” I say.

He chuckles and shakes his head. “*Kir*,” he says with amusement. “Apparently, he didn’t want the heir to embarrass himself in public. Said it was ‘good for business’ for me to be able to dance.”

I shake my head, laughing, and wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him even closer. His hands drop to my waist, holding me steady, and for a second, it’s just us, moving together like this is what we’ve been doing forever.

The moment stretches out as I look up at him, something stirring deep in my chest. He’s watching me with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine, a kind of devotion I’ve never seen directed at me before.

In that moment, something inside me clicks into place again: a realization I’ve been feeling for a long time but have always been scared to admit, even to myself.

I’m really in love with him. Hopelessly.

The truth settles over me, thrilling and terrifying. I don’t know when it happened, but it’s as sure as the ground beneath my feet.

He leans in, his mouth close to my ear. “Another round of drinks?”

“Sure,” I breathe, feeling heat rush to my cheeks as I shake my thoughts away. I step back, almost dizzy, desperate for a moment to collect myself.

“What do you want?”

I shake my head. “It’s okay. I’ll go.” As I turn to leave, the words slip out before I can stop them. “Be right back. Love you.”

I freeze. The words hang in the air like a live wire. The enormity of what I just said slams into me like a charging bull. I don’t even dare look at him, afraid of what I’ll see in his eyes. Panic courses through me, and I do the only thing I can think of—I whirl around, desperate to bolt before I make things even worse.

But before I can get more than a step away, I feel his hand wrap around my arm, pulling me back. I spin, my heart in my throat, and find myself falling into his chest, face-to-face with him, his eyes lancing into mine.

“Damian, I—”

“I love you too,” he murmurs. It hits me harder than anything.

And then he pulls me close, his mouth crashing down on mine in a kiss that leaves no room for doubt.

* * *

“WHY CRANES?”

Hours later, we’re wrapped up in each other back in bed. Damian spoons against my back, his muscled arms circled around me as I curl against him.

“Hmm?” He murmurs lazily.

I flush as I twist the little origami crane I’ve just plucked off the bedside table in my fingers—every edge perfectly straight and sharp, with his customary red yarn bound around it.

It’s not every day that I find them left for me. And I love that. I love that I can be randomly going about my business and find one sitting on my laptop when I come back from getting a snack. Or on my pillow. Or perched on my toothbrush in the morning.

Always the same paper crane, always bound up so beautifully.

“Why is it always cranes?”

Damian shifts behind me. “Because of the crane wife.”

My brows knit. “What?”

“The legend of the crane wife. You’ve got a scroll of it up in your offices back in Kyoto. It made me think of you.”

I twist in his arms, turning to look up into his violet eyes as my brows arch. “I’m lost.”

Damian chuckles. “Which one of us is Japanese?”

I playfully slap his chest as his smile widens.

“In the story, a crane fools a man into believing she’s a woman so he’ll marry her. She really loves him, but she’s scared he won’t love her back if he knows she’s actually a crane. So every night, she stays up and pulls out her feathers with her beak, weaving them into silk for them to sell. But she’s constantly desperate for him to never figure out the truth—that she’s a bird who needs care, who can fly. Every morning, she wakes as a woman again, but she’s always exhausted because it takes everything she has to keep up the illusion, plucking out her feathers, one by one, trying to erase the part of herself she’s afraid he won’t accept.”

His eyes hold mine unflinchingly as I swallow.

“And you think that’s me?” I smirk. “Your crane wife?”

Damian shakes his head. “Your family’s crane wife, Kitsune. Trying to weave yourself into silk to keep the charade going. Afraid of what they’ll say if you just tell them the truth.”

My brow furrows as I chew on my lip.

“When I saw that scroll on your wall the night I decided to break into your office…” he shrugs. “I saw you in it.”

“That seems…sad,” I say quietly.

His lips curl as he reaches up to cup my face. “A little. But I understand it, too. There’s an honor in self-sacrifice for family, for the ones you love. When I figured out that *you* were The Kitsune, the anger I felt towards that entity changed.”

“To?” I whisper.

“Respect. Admiration. But also…” he frowns, his jaw working.

“What?”

“A *need* to protect,” he growls quietly. “A compulsion to care for you, to shield you from anything. To keep you safe.”

My pulse thuds. A teasing tingle spreads over my skin as I feel my heart somehow grow even bigger for this man.

“Is that why you started binding them up in red yarn?” I tease. “Or was that just to be kinky.”

His eyes hold mine, the piercing intensity of them captivating me.

“In the legend of the crane wife,” he says quietly. “The husband eventually breaks his promise to never watch her weave her silk. He peeks in on her one night. And when he does, and sees her true form, she flies away forever, leaving him heartbroken.”

I gasp quietly as Damian’s hand on my cheek pushes back into my hair, firmly gripping the nape as he pulls me tight against his body.

“I bind the cranes, Kitsune,” he murmurs. “To stop that from ever happening.”

I moan as our lips crush together, the intensity of the kiss sweeping me away as his hands and arms wrap me tightly, like steel.

Like red yarn.

Like he’ll never let me go.

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33

DAMIAN

NOTHING CAN TOUCH US.

For the first time, I feel indestructible. Invincible. Like the two of us together are harder, darker, and stronger than forged steel.

She's the reason. She's what makes it feel this way. When she's with me, everything sharpens, every purpose has a more honed edge, everything makes me feel more alive, more grounded.

So this is what being in love feels like.

…Who knew.

It hits me hard every time I think of it. And I have no fucking clue how it happened.

I've had walls around parts of me deep inside since I was a kid; since I watched my parents die in front of me in a maelstrom of twisted steel and shattered glass across an intersection.

It's not even that I swore I'd never open up to anyone. I simply assumed that what I was and what I'd been through made it impossible for me.

And then Hana burst in and burned everything I thought I knew about myself to cinders.

I didn't expect her, didn't expect to need her. But here I am.

Needing her. Never letting her go.

And together, we're fucking unbreakable.

* * *

"YOU READY?"

Hana stiffens as I walk into our dressing room. She's dressed to fucking *kill* in a slinky, gorgeous black dress, with a pair of strappy heels that…well, she knows what ribbons bound around her skin do to me.

"Or…we could *not* go out," I growl, sliding up behind her. "We could stay in, and I could tie you up and do *very* bad things to—"

The second I put my hands on her hips, she flinches, evading my grip.

My brow furrows. "Everything okay?"

She turns, her face blank.

"Yeah," she says flatly, not meeting my eyes. "Fine. But I can't go out tonight. I have plans."

I frown. "I thought *we* had plans."

"Something came up," she says sharply. Without another word, she pushes past me and strides out of the dressing room.

What the fuck?

I frown, following her out the bedroom and into the open concept living area of the penthouse.

"What came up?"

She pauses and grabs her purse off the back of a chair. "Just…work stuff.'

My eyes take her in—the short black dress. The makeup and hair. The heels.

Work stuff?

"Hana," I growl, watching her walk to the door. "Where are you going?"

She turns, defensive. “Just…just something to take care of.”

“What?” I press, trying to make sense of the situation, the tension that suddenly fills the space between us.

She shrugs it off. “It’s nothing. I just…have to go out, okay?” She drops her gaze, like she can’t look at me.

She’s gone before I can question her more. And then I’m alone, wondering what the fuck just happened and what the hell is going on.

I scowl as I slump onto the couch in front of the TV, mindlessly scrolling movie options. I try to rationalize it: we’ve been cooped up inside for weeks, and it’s only been three days since we got our freedom with this ceasefire, at least for now.

I mean, *I’d* probably want to get away from me too if I’d spent three fucking weeks alone with me.

Facts.

But as the hours tick by, my mood darkens. I send Hana a text, but she doesn’t reply. I send another one, like a pathetic douchebag, which gets the same non-reply. Eventually, as it gets later, I try calling. No answer.

It’s one in the freaking morning when she finally gets home. My gaze jerks up from the couch, my brow furrowing when I see how disheveled she is—cheeks flushed, hair a little out of place. My heart twists as I approach her. “Where the hell were you?”

She barely meets my eyes. “Just…out.” She brushes past me, dropping her purse on the kitchen island. “I told you: it was nothing.”

She can’t even look at me when she says it. The ice in her voice, the closed-off look in her eyes—she might as well have put a twenty-foot wall up between us.

She showers as I stand in the bedroom. She even puts pajamas on in there before she comes out, still not looking at me as she crawls into bed.

Okay?

I change into sweats and a t-shirt and slide in next to her, reaching for her, needing some answers, some warmth from her. She pulls away, her voice cracking as she whispers, “Not tonight.”

I lie there, wide awake, sensing the distance growing between us. Her breathing evens out, but I’m too wired to sleep, suspicion gnawing at me.

You’re going crazy. Reaching for shit that isn’t there.

Just the same, I get out of bed, quietly moving to the kitchen. Her purse is still lying there, its contents spilled onto the counter. Instinctively, I start to push things back inside—makeup, her wallet, a stick of lip balm—

Something odd catches my eye: a business card for a club. I pick it up, turning it in my hands. Then I freeze.

There’s a phone number scrawled on the back of it.

For a second, I’m stock-still, trying to process this. But then a flash of anger hits me. I feel crazy for even going there in my head, but I can’t shake the unease twisting in my gut. I grab my phone, tap the number, bring it to my ear.

Two rings later, someone picks up.

“*Hai*?” a deep male voice grunts on the other end.

My eyes narrow.

“Who is this?” I growl, my grip on the phone tightening.

The man laughs—smug, taunting.

Then he hangs up without a word.

My pulse pounds heavily in my ears as I shove the card back into her bag. Then, just as I go to zip it up, I catch sight of something else that makes my world collapse.

No.

I reach inside, my hand shaking as I pull the foil package into the low light of the kitchen.

It’s an open condom wrapper.

Empty.

My vision blurs at the edges as rage swells inside me, clawing up my throat. I storm back to the bedroom, where she’s fast asleep, blissfully ignorant of the inferno raging in me.

“Hana!” I shout, jerking her awake.

She bolts upright, her eyes wide and haggard as she looks at me—in the eyes, for the first time since she walked in.

I hold up the wrapper, my hands shaking with fury. “What the *fuck* is this?!”

She stares at me, silent, not a hint of guilt on her face.

“*Answer me*!!” I roar, my voice bouncing off the walls.

The silence hangs for a second. Then I watch her throat bob as she swallows.

“What did you expect?” Her voice is ice, clipped, emotionless. “This was never real, Damian.”

I have to get out. I stumble back, storming through the penthouse, then out the door, down the two flight of stairs to the street, my blood boiling, my thoughts churning.

I surge into the night air. The second I get outside, I hear her footsteps quick behind me.

“Damian,” she calls, her voice breaking a little. I stop, turning to face her, and her expression falters, a flicker of pain crossing her face. But she pushes it down, her mask slipping back into place.

I can’t hold back. “Is this what I think it is?” I growl, my voice low and dangerous.

Her lip quivers, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Is it?!” I shout, storming over to her until I’m looming over her in front of our building.

“*Yes*.” The word comes out almost like a confession.

My heart shatters, raw pain lancing through me like a blade. “*Why*?!” My voice is hollow, broken.

“Because…” she says, her voice shaking, “you’re not enough.”

I can’t think. I can’t breathe. My fist slams into the wall beside her head, the impact sending a jolt through my arm. She flinches, turning her head away, and it makes me hate myself even more.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see some asshole standing nearby, phone raised, *filming* us. My anger surges, a tidal wave of rage and humiliation crashing over me.

“Fuck off!” I roar.

The motherfucker doesn’t budge. He just keeps fucking recording.

“*FUCK. OFF*!” I yell.

He backs away a little, keeping his phone raised, and I snap. I storm over to him, slapping the phone from his hand.

“*I said fuck off!!*” I bellow, shoving him.

He backs away, snatching up his phone and scurrying off. I turn, looking back at Hana.

Her gaze meets mine, raw and broken. I can’t take it. Can’t handle what I see in her face.

Without another word, I turn and stalk away, letting the darkness swallow me whole.

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HANA

MY WHOLE LIFE, I've thought it was hyperbole when people talk about their heart "aching" when it "breaks".

Hearts don't break. They can't. And they don't ache unless you have a serious medical condition.

But now I know I was wrong. Because my heart is *ripped in half, and it fucking hurts*.

I sit alone in the dark, empty penthouse, curled up on the couch, my knees to my chest. I hug myself as I rock quietly, my heart *aching* so bad I feel like it's going to kill me.

I hate myself for what I just did.

But it was the only way to save him.

There's a dull knock at the door. I don't answer: it's unlocked. Sure enough, a second later, I hear him enter.

"You did well, Hana," he says quietly.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

"You should have been an actress—"

"*Please shut up*," I choke.

"He hates you now, doesn't he?"

My eyes squeeze harder. “*Yes*,” I whisper. “You’ll keep your word?”

“I have no interest in hurting Damian. A deal is a deal.” He inclines his head. “Come. It’s time to go.”

“My brothers…” I say quietly. “Annika and Freya…Sota…Kai…”

“*I* won’t hurt them,” he murmurs. “But wars are messy, Hana.”

Tears bead in the corners of my eyes.

“How could you do this?” I whisper.

“Very easily. Power comes to those who *take it*, not those who wait for it. And it’s past time for me to take what I’m due.”

My eyes close tightly, tears running down my cheeks.

And my heart breaks, aches for the man I just pushed away so cruelly to save.

He sighs. “Time to go, Hana.”

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DAMIAN

THERE'S something viciously hollow about walking into an empty home.

Standing in the dark silence, the penthouse that once felt like a fortress for me and her now feels like anything but.

No note. No explanation. Just a quiet that needles at me, twisting the knife even deeper.

There's some jazz playing softly from the speakers, a haunting reminder of her presence even after she's gone. My teeth clench, the sharp taste of betrayal settling bitter on my tongue. My eyes latch onto something across the room: two origami cranes sitting on the kitchen island.

They're perfectly folded, red thread binding them together in delicate knots, a taunting reminder of everything I thought we were, each fold and crease mocking me.

Guess she left those, too.

I need to get the fuck out of here.

An hour later, I'm tearing through the streets of Tokyo on the back of a motorcycle, as if the roar of the engine might drown out my thoughts. The city blurs, neon lights streaking like blood smears against a dark sky.

I don't ride often, but when I do, it's for this—to dance on the razor's edge and see how close I can get without tipping over.

Tonight, maybe I'll finally see what's on the other side of the line.

I gun the throttle, pushing faster. My focus is a singular burn: the street ahead, the rushing asphalt underneath me. The fury eating me alive.

Suddenly, another engine revs behind me. I glance in the mirror and see a bike tailing me dangerously close. The rider veers toward me like he's trying to force me off the road. I dodge him, but he's right there, pressing closer, relentless. He gets up alongside me, aiming a hard kick at my bike's engine. I zigzag to avoid it, pulse thudding.

This isn't just some shitty driver.

This motherfucker's trying to kill me.

The bike swerves close again, a dark shape cutting through the neon streaks. I turn sharply down a side street, then wrench the bike back onto a busier road. I gun the throttle, hoping I've dodged the psychopath.

But there's the loud rev of his bike again. I glance in my mirror, my teeth gritting.

He's on my ass again.

I weave through traffic. But he's stuck to me like glue. He roars up next to me, and suddenly, he's pulling a baseball bat out of the side harness and swinging it at me.

Fuck.

I try to swerve, but the bat smashes my mirror and shatters my headlight. He strikes again, hard, making the handlebars wrench in my grip.

The bike wobbles.

Suddenly, the wheels skid sideways. I fight for control, but the bike tips and I go flying, hurling myself away from it like you're taught to do. I hit the road hard, pain blazing through me even though I'm wearing riding gear.

The world spins as I go skidding across the road and into a guardrail before the bike slams into it right next to me.

The other bike screeches to a stop nearby. The rider dismounts, dropping the bat, and glinting steel catches my eye as he pulls a *katana* from the sheath on his back.

Oh fuck.

I yank off my cracked, splintered helmet, trying to push to my feet, muscles screaming. But before I can get up, he's on top of me. I grunt as he kicks me in the chest, slamming me back down, his blade pressing to my neck. He yanks off his helmet, and a streetlight catches the fury in his eyes.

Takeshi.

He looks like the god of fucking vengeance as he looms over me, his blade glinting wickedly under the streetlights, a breath from my jugular,.

"You *motherfucker*." His voice is lethal, rage in every syllable. "You're a fucking dead man."

I meet his glare, forcing myself to stay calm despite my thundering pulse. "This doesn't concern you."

"Like hell it doesn't!" he roars, fury twisting his features. He throws a phone down onto my chest, a video playing on the screen. "Watch that. I want you to see why I'm about to cut your fucking head off."

I pick it up, dread settling in my stomach like lead. The video shows me with Hana outside our building, screaming at her, punching the wall next to her as she cries. It…looks bad. *Real* bad. Then the image jerks as I storm up to the guy filming us, my face twisted in a snarl, and slap the phone out of his hand.

Takeshi's blade presses harder against my neck. "Any last words, motherfucker?"

He looks at me steadily. "Though, I'm not sure," he growls. "Do I cut your head off right here, on the side of the road? Or should I drag you somewhere, tie you up, and slice you into little pieces?"

His words trigger something in my head. I frown, piecing things together in my mind.

“What did you just say?”

Takeshi narrows his eyes. “I said I’m going to cut off your fucking head, you piece of shit.”

“No, after that. You said… You’d tie me up.” It’s not the words themselves, but the familiarity they hold. An echo of something that doesn’t belong to this moment, but to something else…a memory.

Takeshi scowls. “Don’t make it weird.”

I push against the blade, ignoring the sting as it nicks my skin. “I need a ride home.”

He laughs coldly. “You think I’m here to give you a *lift*?”

“Just a ride.” I nod, suddenly sure. “*Then* you can cut my head off.”

* * *

BACK AT THE PENTHOUSE, it’s as I left it, jazz still purring through the speakers. The apartment feels like a mausoleum, cold and empty, echoes of Hana lingering in every corner.

“You left your stereo on, motherfucker,” Takeshi mutters as he steps inside, looking around.

My gaze locks on the two origami cranes sitting on the kitchen island.

The sight stirs a nagging thought in me, a question I can’t ignore.

I step closer, noticing that the cranes are intricately bound together with the same red yarn I used whenever I left them for her.

Except—

I gave them to her tied up *separately.*

These are tied *together*.

Bound to each other.

My jaw ticks.

And then, something else hits me. My ears tune to the music playing over the speakers as I turn the cranes in my hand. It's not just any song. It's the *same* fucking song that was playing when I walked in before, on repeat.

I blink as recognition hits me as hard as Takeshi's bat.

The song is "Blue in Green" by Miles Davis—the same song that was playing at the Golden Monkey the night I crashed into her world and turned it upside down.

This was deliberate. At least, I think it might be.

I turn to Takeshi who's watching me with the anger from earlier simmering just beneath the surface.

"Ready to die?" he snarls.

I meet his gaze, heart racing as the pieces start clicking into place. "I don't think Hana cheated on me."

Takeshi's still clinging to his fury. "I really don't give a fuck at this point." He pulls the blade out again.

"Tak." I keep my voice steady, every part of me utterly certain. "I think she's in trouble. Who would benefit from turning us against each other?"

Takeshi's gaze shifts, still unwilling to let his guard down. "Everyone?"

"Who *mostly*?" I press. "Who in Tokyo wants us torn apart? Who stands to gain from our families being at each other's throats? Who'd send some fucking guy to stand outside my building and record me at my worst, and then somehow get that video to you?"

His expression darkens as the penny drops.

"I need to see Kolya Ishida," I mutter. "*Now*."

Takeshi's eyes narrow. "And if you're wrong?"

"If I'm wrong, and *he* doesn't take it, my head is all yours."

He watches me a long moment, hands tense on his sword. Finally he lowers it, anger still burning in his gaze.

“I’m holding you to that,” he grunts.

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DAMIAN

FREYA WAS incredulous when I called.

"*Kolya*?" she'd snapped coldly. "You want a face-to-face with the piece of shit who kidnapped and fucking *tortured* you?!"

I didn't tell her everything. But I did tell her it was about Hana.

" Lead with that next time, dickhead," she'd muttered. "Okay, gimme a minute."

My cousin works fast. It appears Kolya is a man of habit who takes a late dinner at the same upscale restaurant almost every night.

Fueled by adrenaline and rage, I walk in with such conviction that Kolya's men at the front door to the restaurant don't even think to stop me. Two more inside recognize me, though, and move in on me.

Yeah, good luck with that. Coming at me right now is like trying to stop a runaway train with a fly swatter.

I hit the first one so hard that he flies backward off his feet . I whirl savagely on the second, smashing my forearm into his nose before grabbing him and sending him sailing into the host stand.

Chaos erupts as I storm toward the main dining room, just as four more of Kolya's guys rush me. I take out the first, but I'm grappling blindly and without a single shit for my own well-being when the rest of them pile onto me.

I roar like a banshee, fighting, clawing and punching as the Ishida-kai guards take me down to the floor.

“Stop.”

The voice is cool and composed. The men punching me freeze. And when I yank my head up, my eyes land on Kolya Ishida, sitting alone in the middle of the opulent dining room, a glass of wine poised near his mouth.

Kolya nods curtly.

“Let him go.”

His voice is calm, almost amused. I shove another man off, my pulse hammering as I struggle to my feet.

Kolya Ishida is seated at a linen-draped table, sipping his drink with such ease he might as well be on vacation. His piercing grayish eyes glint under the dim lights, his expression barely changing at the sight of me, bloodied and bristling with anger, or of his guards, who’ve been a spectacular failure at keeping me out.

He simply raises a hand, beckoning me forward.

“Come,” he murmurs quietly. “Sit.” He smirks. “I won’t even tie you up and skewer you with a sword this time. Wine?”

My face is pure rage.

“Fuck you.”

He lifts a brow, smirking. “I’m afraid you’re not my type, Mr. Nikolayev.”

My jaw grinds I stalk over and sit across from him, regarding him with deadly fury.

Kolya clears his throat.

“Leave us.”

The response is instant, like a switch being flipped. Everyone—patrons, waitstaff, even his own guards—stands and files out.

We’re alone.

I glare across the table at him, ignoring the pain in my knuckles and chest. Kolya smiles slightly, setting his glass down.

“You understand that it’s considered rude to leave a party early, Mr. Nikolayev? Without saying goodbye to your host?” He smiles tightly.

I glare at him, my fury barely contained. “Funny. *I* was taught it was rude to crucify and almost kill your guests. Where the fuck is she?”

Kolya tilts his head. “Please. I’m not in the habit of keeping track of other men’s fiancées, Damian. It’s…unbecoming.”

Something inside me snaps and I reach for the blade hidden in my coat. Before I can even draw it, Kolya speaks again.

“There are three rifles trained on you right now, Mr. Nikolayev. One on your heart, one between your eyes, and the third on your balls.”

My hand tenses around the hilt of my knife, still in my jacket.

Kolya smirks. “And my men *never* miss.”

A sneer curls my lips. “You think I give a fuck right now about—”

“Your balls? No.” Kolya shakes his head, picking up his wine glass and taking another casual sip. “But I do think you’d be interested to see this.”

He reaches into the breast pocket of his jacket, pulling out a phone. He taps something on it, sets it on the table between us, and turns it so the screen is facing me.

Instantly, my heart goes cold.

“It’s really a lovely home. I’m quite jealous of it, to be honest.”

It’s the Mori house in Kyoto, filmed using a night vision camera.

And in the center of the screen, sitting at a small table outside next to a koi pond, tapping away on her laptop, is Freya. Even in tones of green and black, I recognize her: the Doc Martens, the studded choker.

The room goes still. Slowly, full of poison and venom, my gaze drags like a knife back to Kolya.

He nods at the screen between us.

“My man has a clear, unobstructed shot. And as I was saying, my men *never* miss.” He smiles coldly. “Do you truly believe with everything going on right now, I’d simply be sitting here, waiting for you to waltz in? If so, I’m almost offended that I’m almost at the brink of war with you and yours.”

Kolya takes a slow, measured sip of wine, his eyes never leaving mine over the rim of the glass.

“I made sure my schedule, which your intrepid cousin Freya found—though I do hope it wasn’t *too* easy for her—*incorrectly* gives the impression that I dine here almost every night.”

He leans forward slightly.

“I know Hana Mori is missing. But that’s not what we’re going to discuss.”

“The hell it isn’t,” I hiss dangerously, half rising out of my seat to reach across the table and throttle him. But then my eyes drop to the phone.

To the video of Freya, sitting under the Kyoto moon, oblivious to the danger looking right at her.

…Danger *I’ll* be responsible for pushing her closer to if I make another move toward this motherfucker.

Slowly, inhaling through my nose, I sink back into my chair.

“What are we going to discuss, then,” I mutter.

Kolya’s face is expressionless but something dangerous glints in his eyes as his jaw works. He steeples his hands in front of him, his cold gray eyes never leaving mine. “Where is she.”

My brow furrows. “Who?”

“I can assure you, Mr. Nikolayev,” Kolya says, his voice throbbing with malice, “I’m in no mood for games.”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about.”

His nostrils flare. The veins in his neck throb.

“*Where. Is. She,*” he says icily in a measured, dangerous tone.

“*I. Don’t. Fucking. Know. What. You’re—*”

The man across from me surges out of his seat so fast I can barely comprehend it and backhands me across the mouth.

I go knocking sideways, tipping over his glass and sending wine splattering across the white linen tablecloth, together with blood from my split lip. I snarl in rage and blink back stars. Kolya nods his chin past me and hands instantly grab me. I roar, bucking and twisting, but the men—four of them, I think—overpower me, slamming my cheek down on the table and grabbing my right hand. One of them yanks my arm out, splaying my fingers across the tablecloth.

“I’m not going to ask you again, Mr. Nikolayev,” Kolya growls quietly. The burst of violence and emotion is gone, and his face is back to being utterly calm, eyes lethally focused on me. He reaches into his suit jacket and slips out a small, vicious-looking knife.

Fuck me. That’s—

“I don’t like the Bratva,” he says, his voice chillingly candid. “Frankly, I’m not particularly fond of the Yakuza either. Both tried to strangle me in the cradle.”

I grit my teeth. “And yet, you *are* the Yakuza now.”

He shrugs. “Become what you hate, and you remove its power over you.”

He lifts the blade, letting the light catch it.

“I’m sure you’ve been in Japan long enough to know what a *tantō* knife is, yes, Mr. Nikolayev?”

He slowly presses the edge of it against my pinky finger, right at the knuckle.

My jaw tenses.

“Your little friend, Takeshi Mori, recently took the pinky of an associate of mine.” His eyes glint coldly. “*Not* very good for business, as you might guess.”

He trails the edge of the blade over my knuckle again.

“I’m not going to ask again. Where is she.”

“*Who*,” I snarl.

The blade cuts into my skin, blood instantly spurting out over the white linen beneath it. I grit my teeth, not making a sound as the blade sinks down against bone.

“I admire your stubbornness and resolve, Damian,” Kolya sighs. “But I can assure you, from *years* of personal experience, all men break. Every. Single. One. No matter how tough they think they are, or how big they think their balls, *all* men break under torture. So I *will* find out what you’ve done with her eventually. The question is…”

He drags the blade through the cut he’s already made.

“How many appendages would you care to lose before I learn what you’re going to tell me anyway.”

He leans right down into my face, his eyes slicing into mine.

“*Where. The fuck. Is she*.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about!” I roar. “Even if I did, you could use that thing until the blade went dull, and I’d still never fucking tell you.”

Kolya’s face tenses. For a half second I wince, straining against the men holding me down as Kolya starts to add pressure to my finger.

Then he stops.

He pulls the blade away, the icy, calm expression back on his face. Then he turns and nods past me. I struggle and grunt as I feel hands yank up the cuff of my pants. Metal wraps around my ankle, and I snarl when I feel it click into place.

“Release him.”

The four big fuckers holding me down instantly stand and step away from me as I lurch upright. I whirl on Kolya, seething as he meditatively wipes the blade of the *tantō* knife on the edge of the ruined tablecloth.

“I’m choosing to believe you, Mr. Nikolayev,” he says quietly. His gaze drops to my ankle. I follow it, frowning at the little black box I see strapped around it.

“That’s a tracking device, Damian,” Kolya explains. “You will not attempt to remove, damage, or even tamper with it. If you do, I’ll know. And I should mention—it’s not just Freya that I’ve got my eye on.”

He turns and taps the phone on the table. Instantly, another greenish-black live video feed pops up.

This time, it’s Annika who’s dead center of the screen, standing on a balcony outside her and Kenzo’s room, running a hand through her hair distractedly, a worried look on her face.

Slowly, I rake my gaze back to Kolya, my eyes narrowing.

“What the *fuck* do you want.”

Kolya nods again. A man steps into my peripheral vision before walking over to his boss.

Ryu.

He glares at me before he leans close to Kolya, the two of them speaking quietly before Ryu nods, bows, and steps away again.

“What I want, Mr. Nikolayev, is simple: go find your woman.”

My jaw ticks. “What’s the catch?”

“Catch?”

“You’re letting me go with a tracking device strapped to my goddamn ankle after accusing me of fuck-knows-what and almost cutting off my goddamn finger,” I hiss quietly. “So why don’t we stop jerking each other off and you tell me: *what’s the fucking catch*.”

Kolya’s face is dark and lined, without a single trace of smugness now.

“The catch, Mr. Nikolayev, is that someone very close to me is also missing. And my gut says that when you find your fiancée, you may very well find *her* as well.”

My jaw tightens. “Why does it sound like you know things that might help me, and yet you’re not sharing them?”

Kolya’s face is unreadable as he slowly rolls his neck, adjusts his dinner jacket, and buttons the top button.

“When you and I fight, Damian…or when Kenzo Mori and I fight… It won’t be from the shadows. We will be looking each other in the eye when we draw blood, so we can watch it flow.” A twisted smile spreads across his face. “Otherwise, where’s the fun in that?”

He exhales. “I believe we’re both being played, Mr. Nikolayev. Make of that what you will. In the meantime, I suggest you find Hana Mori. Your life depends on it.” He turns to nod at the phone on the table again. “So do Freya’s and Annika’s.”

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HANA

CONSCIOUSNESS SLAMS into me like a fist to the face.

My head snaps up, my breath coming sharp and fast, filling my lungs with the bitter taste of smoke. There's a sharp chemical taste on my tongue, and something burning at the edges of my mind.

Darkness surrounds me, thick and oppressive. I try to move, but ropes dig into my skin, holding me secure.

I'm tied up.

Raw panic lances into me, sending my pulse spiking as the familiar crashes back—in my veins, my throat, with every thud of my heart in my chest.

I can't move.

It's dark. It's happening again.

And I can't fucking move.

The panic morphs into a vicious black weight, pushing down on every thought and breath until it feels like I'm suffocating in the darkness.

My shoulders ache as I twist my hands against the restraints, trying to find even the smallest bit of give. Nothing. The ropes are unyielding. I try to lurch forward, and then my heart stops when the ground *moves* beneath me.

Tipping. Dropping. Then…lifting slightly, as if I'm perched on something unstable.

My entire reality blurs at the edges as naked fear grips me. I twist again, screaming, desperate to escape this hellish nightmare before it claws me back to that night. But then the ground shifts again.

A sharp, loud whistle pierces the darkness.

My head jerks in the direction of the sound, and my heart stutters when I realize *I'm not alone*.

The girl looks a little younger than me, maybe twenty-ish, with long, coppery-blonde hair cascading down her shoulders and wide, gray eyes that meet mine in the shadows. Like me, she's tied to a chair, arms and legs bound, about twenty feet to my left.

When our eyes lock, she quickly shakes her head side-to-side.

I'm about to open my mouth when she looks down significantly into the darkness below. I frown as I follow her gaze to the floor beneath me.

Holy fucking God.

Cold, sharp horror sinks into me. We're perched on a massive wooden plank that stretches like a see-saw across a blackened, charred steel beam.

I'm on one side of the fucked-up see-saw, and she's on the other.

We look to be about the same size. The same height. And critically, the same *weight*.

Balanced.

As my eyes adjust to the darkness, my throat closes off and my blood turns to ice.

The abyss drops beneath our little see-saw into inky black nothingness, endless and empty, waiting to swallow us both, maybe a hundred feet below.

Panic surges up, my breathing quickens, and I start to jerk and yank at my ropes again as fear wraps its bony claws around my throat.

The floor rocks again. Instantly, three sharp, loud whistles ring out in the murky darkness. I shudder as I clamp my mouth shut and go still, turning

slowly to look at her.

Again, the girl shakes her head side-to-side, pleading with me to stay still.

If I don't, the board we're on will rock, pick up momentum, and eventually tip to one side.

Sending us both plunging to our deaths into the darkness.

The girl's eyes are locked on mine, intense, wide with her own fear.

"Who are you?" I whisper, my voice as raw as my nerves.

Her expression flickers but she doesn't answer, just gives a quick shake of her head. I keep my voice low, fighting to stay still. "Please," I ask again. "Who are you?"

Nothing. Not a word. Just the same, warning look.

"I'm Hana," I say, forcing myself to speak slowly, keeping my tone calm. "What's your name?"

She just stares at me, her eyes flicking to the side like she's trying to tell me something in a language I don't understand. I don't know whether to scream or cry, but I force myself to breathe, to hold onto whatever shred of control I have left.

"Where are we?" I ask, louder now. I repeat it in Japanese, then in what little French I know. My voice echoes hollowly in the vast emptiness around us. She just stares back at me, silent.

I whirl my gaze around, panicking as I try to see into the darkness. The burnt smell hits me harder, and suddenly, I know where I am.

This is the office building I bought to house the Mori Holdings and Mori-kai empire in Tokyo, before it was burned to ash.

That's where I am, balanced somewhere in the charred metal framework of the roof, teetering over the drop to the burned-out basement warehouse far below.

Helplessness, rage and dark fury surge in me as I struggle against the ropes, feeling them bite deeper with every movement as I try to remember how I

even got here—

Then I flinch as it all comes rushing back.

Miyamoto.

It all floods back into my mind like acid, shocking me all over again and making me sick as my heart wrenches.

It was the suddenness of it all. The phone call from him, telling me exactly what to do. To leave the apartment, dressed as if going out. Not to tell Damian a word of this conversation. To snub him. To be cold, distant and mean to him.

…or Miyamoto would trigger a bomb inside our apartment.

When I left, the motherfucker picked me up himself. He looked me in the eye and told me it would be “more realistic” if I sucked his cock.

I told him I’d bite it off if he tried, and mercifully, I think he might have believed me, because he didn’t force it. But he did drive me around for hours.

Smacked me a few times, fucked up my hair, and disheveled my dress before dropping me off again.

Then came the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. I had to walk into that apartment I shared with Damian and make the man I love think I’d been out cheating on him. The club business card with the number to one of Miyamoto’s *waka gashira*. The empty condom wrapper.

Looking Damian right in the eye and stabbing him in the heart as my own bled out, knowing if I didn’t do all these things, Miyamoto would kill him.

That motherfucker made me hurt the person I love the most in this world.

Later, I remember him coming to get me and leading me back out to his car. That’s the last thing I recall before it all goes black.

My eyes close as my heart wrenches painfully.

Miyamoto was clear: no notes, no warnings left for Damian. His men combed over the whole apartment to make sure.

But they didn’t notice the origami cranes bound together. The Miles Davis song on repeat.

I only hope to God that Damian does, and understands their significance.

I shudder, forcing back the sob that threatens to rip from my throat. I look around, my pulse jackhammering as I try not to think about the ropes, or the see-saw, or the dark abyss below. With a snarl, I snap my head to the girl tied up next to me.

“Who are you!?” I bellow.

Her eyes plead with me, but she doesn’t say a goddamn thing, and it’s *infuriating*.

“*Why*?!” I scream at her. “Why won’t you fucking talk to me?!”

“She can’t, Hana.”

I whip my head around, a shiver chasing down my spine as a familiar voice comes from the shadows, smooth and cold.

Miyamoto steps into view, standing on a flat, unburned piece of what was the top floor of the building across from me. He’s watching us cruelly, his eyes glinting with dark satisfaction.

“You *motherfucker*,” I hiss, voice trembling with rage. “You traitorous, backstabbing *motherfucker*!”

Miyamoto just smiles, tilting his head as he contemplates me.

“What the hell do you want?” I yell.

He chuckles, taking a slow step to the edge and peering down into the darkness. He looks back up, his gaze drifting between me and the girl. “Tokyo,” he growls. “I want Tokyo. I want to be the last man standing when the dust settles.”

I clench my jaw, bitterness rising in me like poison. “I thought you were *retiring*,” I hiss. “Pledging your empire to the Mori-kai, in return for my father helping you when you were younger.”

He raises an eyebrow, smirking. “I did say that, didn’t I?” he murmurs. He sighs. “That’s the thing about people when they’ve already decided they have an enemy. They don’t see anything else. They put blinders on. And they welcome help wherever it may come from.”

Miyamoto smiles as he spreads his arms. “Your family was so hungry for Tokyo. Meanwhile Kolya was desperate to defend his empire and his city. All you both needed was enough fuel, and a match to light the whole thing on fire.”

“You’re insane,” I whisper, my voice tight with fury.

He chuckles, dark and mocking. “No. Simply thorough. Strategic. I know how to play the long game—how to play the right pieces at the right time.” He shrugs. “Hiring men to attack you in my home and blaming the Ishida-kai. Encouraging you to buy this building, lying firmly within Kolya’s territory—a move he could only, *would* only, see as an act of aggression that required a response. Of course, then Kolya called for that ridiculous cease-fire and I had to get more aggressive in my approach. But now… well… Here we are.”

My God. He’s orchestrated everything.

He smiles at me. “Please. Go ahead. Tell me Damian will come save you, or that I won’t get away with this.”

“*He will*,” I spit, glaring death at him. “And you won’t.”

Miyamoto’s smile widens, his eyes gleaming. “Ah, but that’s the beauty of it, Hana. Someone actually *will* come—for one of you. And when they do, they’ll save the one they want, letting the other die.”

He gestures to the plank the girl and I are sitting on.

“Whoever comes will have to make a choice. They can save you…but if they do, she’ll fall.” He points to the girl, who’s staring at him, pale and tense. “Or they can save *her*, and *you* will fall.”

My stomach twists, the dread settling heavy and cold. I look at the girl, see the fear in her wide eyes, and I know he’s right. Remove the weight from one side of the scale, and the other side drops.

“And I’ll get what I’ve always wanted,” he says mildly. “Tokyo. Power. Control. Whatever happens here tonight, one side will have killed someone the other side holds very dear, pitting the Mori-kai and the Ishida-kai against each other until they’re both ashes. And when they’re gone, I’ll be the one left standing.”

My throat tightens, rage boiling inside me. “You’re a monster,” I spit.

He just laughs, unbothered. “I’m a survivor. In the end, survivors do what they must.”

I want to scream, to fight, to make him hurt for all the pain he’s caused. But all I can do is sit here, trapped, as he smiles that cold, mocking smile.

He takes one last look at me, his eyes glinting. “And now…” He smiles. “We wait.”

He turns away, his footsteps echoing in the silence as he disappears back into the shadows, leaving me alone with the girl, heavy silence and the weight of darkness settling over us.

I close my eyes, trying to block out the sound of the board creaking under me, trying to hold onto something, anything, that can keep the fear away. I think of Damian, his face, his strength, his fire. He’s out there. I have to believe he’ll come for me.

But as the silence settles in, and darkness closes around us, I’m not sure belief is enough.

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DAMIAN

I CALL Freya the second I leave the restaurant.

“So was he there when you—”

“Freya,” I growl tightly, my jaw clenching. “Can you track Hana’s phone?”

There’s a deafening silence on the other end of the line for a second.

“Okay, hold up,” she says quietly. “I was willing to go on faith before, when you wanted to find Kolya and told me it involved Hana but that ‘everything was fine’. I’m not doing that any longer. What the *fuck* is going on?”

My throat bobs. “Frey, I need you to trust me. Can you or can you not trace Hana’s phone.”

“Obviously, but—”

"*Freya*,” I hiss. “I just need you to do this. I need you not to ask questions, and I need you to fucking trust me. Okay?”

She quiet for a half a second before she exhales.

“Okay,” she says, her voice tight. “But only because I love you. Gimme a sec.” I hear the clicking of her laptop keyboard in the background. My fingers clench tight around the phone.

It’s only that sick feeling—the one that eats at my gut like acid—that’s driving me right now. The knowledge that something’s deeply wrong.

Hana swears, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“What?” I blurt.

“There’s nothing. Hana’s phone is off. No data transfers or tower pings either, which means the SIM card is out.”

Fuck.

I glance around nervously before I lower my voice. “Frey—you’re at the house?”

“Yeah.”

“I need you to trust me again,” I growl quietly. “How quickly could you…”

I trail off as Ryu steps quietly in front of me, smiling thinly as he shakes his head and wags his finger side-to-side.

“Give them any warning,” he murmurs quietly, “and triggers get pulled. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Nikolayev?”

My eyes pull to murderous slits, but I nod slowly.

“I’m glad we understand each other, Mr. Nikolayev.”

“What?” Freya says into the phone. “How quickly could I what?”

“Nothing,” I say mutter, fury throbbing under the surface. I can’t warn her or Annika without getting them killed, because that fucking psycho asshole Kolya—

I freeze, my brow furrowing tightly at the memory of something Kolya recently said.

I believe we’re both being played, Mr. Nikolayev. Make of that what you will.

I’m absolutely being fucking played. But why the fuck did he say “we”?

I shoot Ryu a venomous look before I turn away and stride toward my car parked at the curb. He doesn’t follow as I slide in behind the wheel and shut the door, wrapping me in silence.

“Frey,” I growl quietly. “If I tell you something, can you promise to stay calm?”

“Sure,” she murmurs back cautiously. “Talk to me?”

"Hana's missing. At first I thought it was Kolya, but now—"

“*What*?!” My cousin shrieks. “Fuck, Damian! Does Kenzo—”

“*No*,” I growl. “He can’t know. Not yet.”

“What the fuck!?” she hisses. “Why not?! Damian, we need to—”

“*Freya*!”

The sharpness in my tone silences her. I exhale slowly.

“Freya,” I say, quieter now. “Please. Trust me on this.”

There’s a pause. “Okay, what do you need?” she says tightly.

"Who would benefit from pitting the Mori-kai against the Ishida-kai?" I ask. “Assuming neither side wins.”

She’s quiet for a second, thinking. “Any other syndicate in Tokyo, for one,” she finally replies. “Take out the two biggest players, it’s open season. Anyone and everyone would try to fill the power vacuum.”

I nod slowly as it settles into place. “But they’d have to be big enough and strong enough to back that up, right? And they’d need to move quickly—be ready the split second a war started to swoop in and pick up the pieces.”

She takes a sharp breath. “You don’t think this is a random player…”

My jaw clenches. “Freya, *think*. Who would be able to fill the gap and already have the pieces in place?”

There’s a beat of silence, and then I hear her gasp quietly at the same moment it clicks with me, too.

Holy fuck.

I close my eyes, bitter rage clawing up my chest. “Miyamoto.”

“Wait, seriously?” she whispers.

“He rallied a *ton* of smaller families to his, with the promise that they’d be absorbed into the Mori-kai once the merger happened. But that means, with all those guys reporting to him, he’s the third biggest Yakuza family in Tokyo right now.”

“Fucking hell, Damian,” she says. “We have to tell Kenzo—”

“No.”

“*What*?” She blurts. “Damian—”

“Frey, if you tell Kenzo, Kolya will kill him,” I hiss darkly.

Okay, that’s not what Kolya said. But I’m not worried about Kenzo right now.

I’m worried about *Freya*, and the fact that Kolya has a sniper on her. If I say anything or tell her to run, there’s a chance she’ll be killed before she can get away.

I also don’t want to scare the hell out of her.

“What the *fuck*, Damian! We—”

“Yeah, still need you to just trust me,” I hiss. “*Please*, Frey.”

She draws in a shaky breath and then exhales.

“Okay,” she says quietly. “I’m all ears. What do you need?”

“One, trace Miyamoto,” I mutter. “And two, how easy would it be for you to shut down a tracking device?”

“What kind of tracking device?”

“The kind strapped to my ankle right now.”

She swears. “Fucking Kolya?”

“Fucking Kolya,” I reply.

Freya exhales slowly. “Okay… Take a picture of it and text it to me. And see if you can find a bar code or serial number. I doubt I can remotely disable it, but I might be able to track it.”

“It’s a start,” I mutter, pulling up my pant leg, taking a photo. Then I slip the phone closer to my foot and snap a pic of a series of numbers I find printed there. “Texting you now,” I say.

“Got it.”

“Priority, though, is—”

“Hana. Yeah, no shit,” she mutters, clicking away at her laptop. “Hang on, I’m trying to trace Miyamoto’s phone… Yes!” she hisses triumphantly. “He’s on the move, definitely in a car. Looks like he’s on the way to his house.”

I start the car and ram it into drive. Suddenly, my brow creases.

That’d be too easy, him keeping her at his house. Plus lazy and stupid. And there’s clearly nothing lazy or stupid about Miyamoto for him to have orchestrated all this.

“Can you tell where he’s driving *from*?”

“Good, an actual challenge,” Freya mutters, clicking away. “Yeah, I can triangulate his data patterns and sub-node transmitter cache—”

“Translate the nerd-speak, Frey,” I growl.

“It means shut the fuck up and let me work,” she snaps back, fingers clacking on the keys. “*Got it*!” she crows. “He was just at the destroyed Mori Holdings office building.”

The tires squeal as I explode from the curb, roaring into the night to find the woman I love.

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HANA

IT TAKES everything I have to keep the panic and the screaming anxiety at bay as the ropes press into my flesh.

The darkness around me presses down heavily as I pull at the restraints. My pulse thuds in my ears. I can feel every splinter of the rough wood of the chair, the ropes cutting deep into my skin, and the thin rivulet of blood as it trickles down my wrist.

I try to force my mind to stay focused—to cling to thoughts of Damian.

Breathe. Just breathe.

One pull, then another. I yank harder, the rope shifting. The give is encouraging.

The board rocks unsteadily beneath me. I freeze, turning to glance at the girl. She's watching me, those wide, haunted eyes staring right into mine, catching every move I make. She's silent, but I don't need her to speak. She's got a lethal gaze trained on me, one that doesn't do anything to mask her obvious fear at my motions rocking the board.

"Sorry," I whisper, my voice barely loud enough to bridge the distance. She just narrows her eyes, then throws a pointed look into the shadowy abyss below.

She's right. Even if I get free, then what? If I ran toward the middle, to the beam, the whole thing would tip over, sending her to her death.

Obviously I’m not going to do that.

“I’m working on that part," I murmur to her, low and intense, fingers digging harder into the knot at my wrist. "If I can just get free..."

My hand finally slips through. I gasp quietly as it pulls loose, my fingers coated in blood and sweat. The girl’s eyes widen, but her expression doesn’t soften. We’re both still as trapped as we were a second ago. But my tension and panic start to ebb slightly.

It’s something.

I work to free my other hand, then bend carefully to yank at the knots at my ankles, trying to keep my movements small.

A noise cuts through the silence—a faint echo from the shadows nearby. I freeze, every muscle tensing. I barely breathe as I squint into the dark recesses of the building, waiting. Another sound—a door opening, the creak of metal on metal. My blood chills, but I don’t stop, hands working faster. I’m so close.

Then a silhouette stumbles from the stairwell, tall, fierce in his stride.

Silvery hair.

Sharp, beautiful, violet eyes.

Damian.

I feel an almost overwhelming urge to cry out, but it knots up inside my throat. He stares at me, frozen for a second, before relief crashes over him, lighting up his face. Then he moves forward, inching to the edge of the broken floor, stopping just short.

"Hana," he breathes, and the sound of my name on his lips is everything.

I fight back the flood of tears, swallowing hard. “Damian!” I finally blurt. “I didn’t mean a word of it!! Miyamoto—”

“I know, Kitsune,” he chokes, his voice tight as his purple eyes blaze through the darkness to stab into me. “I know. Fuck, Hana, I never, ever should have doubted—”

“It’s what he told me to do,” I choke. “Make you believe that I’d betrayed you. He—he—”

My voice chokes off as the emotions tangle around my throat. Damian just shakes his head and moves to the edge again.

“I’m going to get you off there,” he growls. He glances over at the girl, his brow furrowing as if he’s just noticed her.

“Who the fuck are you?” he asks.

“She doesn’t talk,” I say quickly. “Or—she can’t, I don’t know. I also don’t know who she is.”

Damian’s jaw is tight as he peers at the girl. “She’s important to Kolya,” he growls quietly.

He turns, his eyes dragging over the board, the way the girl and I are balanced, and then back to me, new urgency in his gaze. “We don’t have much time. There’s a tracker on my ankle. Kolya’s men will be here soon, and when they arrive, this all gets *way* more complicated.”

He turns and scans the piece of intact flooring he’s standing on. His gaze lands on a length of rope coiled by the stairs, the same stuff binding the girl and me. He grabs it, deftly looping and tying it into a makeshift lasso.

He walks to the beam and steps onto it, jaw working as he finds his balance above the abyss. He looks at me, his eyes blazing with wild intensity before his gaze shifts to the girl.

“I’m not letting you fall,” he promises her, his voice like iron.

She glares at him, skeptical. But he moves carefully, still holding the rope, taking steady steps across the beam to the middle, right next to the plank laid across it.

“Hold still,” he murmurs, tossing the rope at her chair. It falls short, and he pulls it back, trying again. Another miss. His face hardens, his jaw clenched as he tries once more. This time it lands over her chair, and he pulls it tight. The girl gasps as the chair scoots a little on the wood beneath her.

Damian nods as he loops the rope twice around his waist, then makes a slip knot with it, like a rock climbing belayer. He looks at me, tossing me the other end of the rope.

“Tie it to yourself,” he says.

I nod quickly, shaking as I stand carefully. I loop the rope around my waist, tying it tightly and turning to him, my face paling.

“Now, you need to walk toward me, one step at a time.”

The other girl whistles sharply, yanking our attention to her as her eyes narrow sharply.

“I’m *not* going to let you fall,” Damian growls, voice fierce and unyielding. “Well… you’ll fall a little, but I promise I’ll catch you.”

She swallows, her face turning white as the abyss yawns below her. She looks at Damian, clearly sizing him up. When her gaze slips to me, I give her a small smile.

“He really will. You can trust him,” I say.

She grimaces, but she gives a reluctant nod.

I take the rope and inch forward. Every muscle is coiled tight, and I swear I can feel every single heartbeat echo in my veins. The board shifts, dipping ominously as I creep toward Damian.

The girl whistles sharply again. Damian turns to her. “Easy,” he growls, extending a hand, palm out. “I just need you to stay—”

“Get the fuck away from her!”

All three of us whirl to the bellowing voice. A tall Japanese man comes bolting out of the shadows, a gun in his hand and a snarl on his face.

“Ryu!” Damian yells at him, holding a hand up. “Stay back—”

The gun explodes, belching fire and thunder as Ryu pulls the trigger.

“*STOP!*” Damian roars. “Stay the fuck back!”

But the other man is blinded by fear, or maybe fury, or both. He snarls as he raises the gun at Damian, cocking it again.

Then suddenly, he’s yanking it around toward me.

Oh God...

The barrel flashes. I scream as I dive to the ground, wincing as the wood next to me explodes in a hail of splinters and dust.

Instantly, the world begins to shift as the plank beneath me tips violently under the mismatched weight at either ends. Damian’s eyes flash as he yanks a gun out of his waist and fires at Ryu, hitting the other man in the stomach and dropping him to the ground.

The board shifts again, tipping hard to one side. Then the other.

Time slows as I watch, horrified, as the other end of the board tips down toward the abyss. The girl’s eyes go wide and her mouth opens in a silent scream.

There’s no yell. No sound. Just a choked, sharp, haunting gasp as the chair slides back and falls over the edge.

The second she’s gone, the board rocks hard the other way. My stomach plunges as the plank gives out beneath me.

“Damian!”

My voice tears from my throat as gravity yanks me into the yawning chasm below.

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DAMIAN

HANA AND THE GIRL DROP, and there's no time to think. Just act.

I dive over the edge, fingers outstretched, desperate to catch her. The rope jerks tight around my waist, yanking me hard, pain flaring like fire where it cinches into my ribs. My vision blurs for a second, my body screaming in shock.

I yell in sharp, searing agony, but I don't stop. I can't. I look down, and there she is—dangling at the end of the rope, her body limp, swaying slightly in the air, out cold.

"Hana!" I roar. No answer.

Blood seeps from my side, dark and wet, sliding down the rope in slick rivulets.

Fuck.

I think Ryu may have hit me.

I glance down, wincing when I see the blood flowing freely from the puncture-hole in my side.

Yeah, he did.

The knot around my waist is soaked, and I feel it start to slip. Panic claws at me, an animal urge to fight the pull of gravity, fight against the sheer terror of losing Hana.

I look over and spot the other girl, still tied to the chair, face pale as she clings to her own lifeline. She's got one hand free now, fingers clutching the rope, and the determination in her gaze strikes me. She's fighting just as hard.

Nothing personal, but she's not who I'm here for, and she knows it. She's on her own—at least until I can get Hana to safety.

I look back at Hana, unconscious, suspended on that thin, blood-slicked rope. The knot holding her gives a little, and my heart leaps into my throat as she slips down an inch.

There's only one choice here, only one thing I can do. I tighten my grip, gritting my teeth as I look back up the rope, looped over the beam.

Go. Go fucking now.

My entire body feels like it's on fire as I start to pull both my weight and Hana's up, my grip digging into the rope to fight the slickness of the blood coating my hands. I groan, muscling my way up inch by torturous inch, knowing damn well that any second, I could feel the weight go slack behind me when her knot gives way.

I *won't* let that happen.

Every pull feels like hell, pain ripping through the bullet wound in my side. Blood flows from me, thick and steady, dripping down toward Hana hanging below. The rope is so wet it's almost impossible to hold on, but I push through, clawing my way back to the beam by sheer force of will.

"Hana," I grit out, voice raw, pain blinding. She's the only thing keeping me focused.

My vision blurs again as I reach the beam, chest heaving with the effort. I brace myself, my grip starting to slip, but I tighten my hold even more, pulling her up inch by precious inch. She's so close now, so damn close—but the knot around her waist loosens, slipping, the blood making it slick and dangerous.

"*No*," I seethe to myself, my pulse roaring in my ears.

I won’t let go. I *can’t*. She’s everything—my only reason for doing any of this.

But I’m fading, my head swimming with exhaustion, the blood loss sapping my strength. My muscles shake and my hands are numb as I pull her the last few inches, dragging her onto the beam. Just as the knot gives way, I grab her under the arms, yanking her to safety.

“Hana,” I whisper, my fingers desperately brushing her cheek. Her eyes flutter open, hazy with confusion, and relief floods through me, wild and overwhelming.

“Damian?” she murmurs, her voice so soft it’s almost lost in the chaos.

“I love you,” I groan, the words like a final confession. The last thing I have to give.

And then the world tilts, my vision darkening. My body slumps, the strength seeping from me as everything slips away, and the last thing I see—the last thing I’ll ever see—is her face, alive and safe, as I descend into darkness.

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HANA

DAMIAN FALLS OVER THE EDGE, and my world shatters.

“NO!” I scream, my voice raw as I watch him plummet. The rope catches him, jerking his body violently as it stretches taut. His limp form dangles above the darkness, and a searing, gut-wrenching fear takes hold of me.

“Damian!” I scream again, reaching for the rope, slippery and thick with his blood. I can barely hold on. The rope slides through my hands, burning my palms. My muscles strain, fighting to pull him up, but it’s like dragging dead weight out of a black hole.

“Please,” I sob, gasping as he slips inch by inch. The knot at his waist loosens a little more, and I know he’ll run out of rope soon.

And when he does, he’ll fall, and I’ll lose him forever.

“Wake up!” I shout, my voice breaking. “*Fucking wake UP!*” The scream wrenches from my throat. “PLEASE!” I beg, sobbing. “Wake up, Damian! Fight! I love you—just fight, *please*!”

Don’t die.

You can’t die, because I’m in love with you.

Suddenly, the rope jerks taut across the top of the beam. I look down, eyes wide as I watch the other girl use her now-freed legs to swing out and then in, crashing both her and the chair the rope is tied to into Damian’s limp

body. I scream, but then I see her grab him with her free arm, looping her elbow under his armpit and gritting her teeth.

She glances up, her gaze fierce as she nods at me, silently telling me to hold on.

I choke out a sob, my words tumbling out in a rush. “Thank you, thank you!”

The knot is still slipping. The girl clings to him with everything she has, but all she’s going to be able to do is delay the inevitable.

He’s just too heavy.

“DAMIAN!” I scream again, tears pouring down my cheeks. “*PLEASE—*”

“Hana!!”

A voice rips through the air, and I whip around as the stairwell door slams open. Kai barrels out, with Isaak right behind. They don’t even hesitate; they rush across the beam to my side, eyes widening as they take in the scene. Isaak nearly throws himself over the edge toward Damian, grabbing the rope, pulling with raw strength.

In an instant, Kai lurches after him, grabbing Isaak’s belt to steady him as Isaak hauls up Damian and the girl. Blood coats the rope, slick and sticky. But Isaak digs in, his face twisted in determination. I join in, all of us pulling with everything we’ve got.

The weight feels impossible, every second feeling like an eternity. The rope creaks, the frayed edge splitting further. Isaak and Kai grunt, muscles bulging, faces red with effort.

“Grab them!” Isaak bellows at Kai in his thick Russian accent. Kai lurches forward, grabbing the girl just as Isaak yanks Damian onto the beam. With a final rush of adrenaline, all five of us tumble back onto the intact floor.

The moment Damian’s safe, I collapse beside him, chest heaving, tears streaking my face, relief flooding through me.

Suddenly, the door to the stairwell swings open again and four men come rushing out, guns drawn. Kai hisses as he yanks out his own sidearm, Isaak

doing the same.

“Ishida-kai!” One of the newcomers barks. “Drop your fucking weapons!”

“Drop yours!” Isaak roars back.

The air crackles with tension, the moment hanging like a blade on a string. But then the girl with the coppery-blonde hair steps between everyone, her expression deadly calm. She gives the Ishida-kai men a look, her expression sharp as steel as she shakes her head slowly. She looks at the head guy and gestures to him in sign language. He scowls but nods and turns to mutter at the other men. Two of them rush over to a badly wounded Ryu, picking him up gingerly as he groans.

The girl turns to me, her eyes softening for a moment. She nods once, briefly, meaningfully. I nod back, feeling an overwhelming gratitude that I can’t even begin to express. “Thank you,” I mouth, my voice too broken to speak.

She gives me a faint smile, then signs something else before turning away.

She and the Ishida-kai men carrying Ryu disappear into the stairwell and the shadows.

Kai and Isaak both slump, breathing heavily, relief washing over them. Then, without any warning, Isaak turns and throws his arms around Kai, pulling him into a fierce embrace.

Kai does the same, embracing Isaak like they’re old friends.

I smile as Isaak turns his head and whispers into Kai’s ear before it looks like he…kisses his neck?

Wait, *what*?

But before I can even process that, Damian stirs, a low groan escaping him. My focus snaps back, my heart leaping. “Damian!”

I fall to my knees beside him, wrapping my arms around him, feeling his warmth and solidity. Tears spill over as I pepper his face with kisses, unable to hold back, to keep from touching him everywhere to reassure myself he’s really here.

He blinks, his eyes hazy as he looks up at me. There's exhaustion and pain there, but he's alive.

And he's mine.

His fingers reach up, brushing a strand of hair from my face, his touch so gentle it makes me start to cry.

"Kitsune," he murmurs quietly as I sob, lean down, and sear my lips to his.

I don't let go. I just keep kissing him, holding him, letting my tears drip onto his face, as if stopping any of those things will mean I lose him all over again, for good.

"*I'm not going anywhere*," he whispers against my lips. "Ever."

"Good. You're not allowed to," I choke, kissing him again and holding him tight.

"Hana."

I look up to find Kai looking at me. My eyes drop to where his pinky finger is laced with Isaak's. I glance up at his face again, a smile twisting my mouth as I eye him. He clears his throat, blushing a little, but he doesn't let go of the small touch he has on Isaak.

"We should leave," he growls.

"I mean, I *am* shot," Damian grunts.

Kai frowns. "That's not why."

"Well, thank you for your concern for my personal safety, dickhead—"

Kai ignores Damian as he turns to me. "More of Kolya's men will come. After what just happened with the girl, they might be friendly…or they might consider her having been in that situation at all an act of aggression."

My brow furrows as I glance to Isaak and then back to Kai. "Who is she?"

Kai's face hardens, his jaw clenched as he looks in the direction the girl disappeared. "That," he growls, a dangerous glint in his eyes, "was Katarina

Ishida.” His gaze shifts back to me, his expression deadly serious. “Kolya’s daughter.”

My jaw drops. “His…*what*?”

“Hana,” Damian murmurs, pulling my attention back to him, cocking a brow, his violet eyes glinting as they hold mine. “I don’t really give a shit who she was right now. Or about Kolya.” He winces as he stretches up, pulling my ear down to his lips. “I just need to get you someplace where I can tear your fucking clothes off, *now*.”

I blush, turning to meet his eyes.

“How about we plug up that hole in you first.”

“Well, fuck, that was going to be my line.”

I laugh as he grabs me, kisses me deeply and holds on tight, like he’ll never let go.

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EPILOGUE

HANA

One month later:

"CAN I take this blindfold off yet?"

“Nope,” Damian grunts beside me, steering the car.

I can feel the turn in the road as we take a curving path through Kyoto, but my sense of direction obliterated along with my sight. The blindfold is snug, but I still feel his presence beside me, smell his familiar citrusy, clean scent.

“Can you at least untie me?” I gasp, feeling the rope wound tightly around my wrists, every nerve pulsing. His hand brushes my arm, and I shiver as he tugs on the rope possessively, making my heart race.

“Why?” His voice is low as he leans closer, his breath warm on my neck. “Is it making you wet?”

“*Yes*,” I whisper, barely able to get the word out. Every cell in my body wants him right here and right now. The ache is almost unbearable.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, his voice silk and iron all at once. “You’re going to have to be patient.”

Patience has never been a virtue of mine with him. Every moment is laced with an urgency I can't shake, an insatiable need that always craves more.

We drive in silence, his hand resting on my thigh, his fingers tracing lazy circles that make the wait almost painful. My mind races, trying to guess where we're going, but there's no knowing with him. Never has been.

I try to distract myself, my thoughts drifting to the life we're building. We're only back in Kyoto temporarily to pack before our big move to Tokyo. I've loved living here, loved the memories I've made. But Tokyo is home now, with all its complexities.

The Mori-kai have officially staked their claim, and although the ceasefire with the Ishida-kai is over, the truce is still holding. For now. Sort of.

It's turned into a bit of a cold war, each side marshaling its forces in secret—securing allies, shoring up resources, digging battle trenches. Something *big* is going to happen, I can feel it. But whenever I voice my concerns about it, Kenzo brushes me off with his usual calm. He assures me there's a strategy in place.

"Takeshi has a plan," he keeps telling me.

That's exactly what worries me—the fact that it's my *psychotic twin* who has the plan.

As for Miyamoto…well. His empire has crumbled, the Yakuza families once loyal to the Katō-kai now split between Mori-kai and Ishida-kai.

His power is gone: rumor is that he's a shadow of himself, hiding away like a paranoid ghost in his empty mansion. There's a strange satisfaction in knowing he's alone, stripped of the power he was desperate to cling to so fiercely.

The car stops, jarring me back to the present. Damian takes my hand in his and guides me out, his grip firm and steady. I stumble slightly, feeling pavement change to floorboards beneath my feet, the warmth of indoors swallowing me as he leads me forward.

"Where are we?" I ask. There's a familiar scent, but I can't quite place it. My pulse quickens as we stop, his hands moving to my wrists. The ropes

loosen and fall away, and I flex my hands, enjoying the freedom, though my eyes are still bound.

“We’re here,” he whispers, his breath teasing the edge of my ear. Then, with a slow, deliberate touch, he lifts the blindfold.

I blink, my vision adjusting, and my breath catches.

We’re standing in the Golden Monkey, my favorite jazz club in the world, where he stormed into my life, intense and utterly impossible to ignore.

“Blue in Green” plays softly—the recording drifting lazily over the house speakers, rich and soulful, like they’ve been waiting here all this time for us to return.

I turn to him, wide-eyed, a wide smile splitting my lips. “What are we doing here?”

He doesn’t answer right away. Instead, he slowly reaches into his pocket. A small glint of metal catches the dim light, and he holds it up between us. Without a word, he drops the key into my hand.

“What’s this?” I whisper.

“This is yours,” he growls, his eyes dark and intense. He turns to nod his chin at the space around us. “All of it. You’re the new owner.”

For a second, I’m stunned, unable to process the weight of it. And then joy floods through me, raw and overwhelming. I squeal, throwing my arms around him, pulling him close as I press my lips to his in a deep, desperate kiss. The world around us fades, leaving only this moment.

Damian pulls me down onto a chair, his arms wrapping around me as I straddle his lap, feeling the solid strength of him beneath me. I shiver when I feel the throbbing thickness of his cock against my core, and when he reaches between us, yanking his belt off and tugging open his pants, I moan. His fingers slip under the gusset of my panties, pulling it aside, and I whimper when I feel his huge cock pushing against me. With a soft cry, I bite down on my lip as he sinks into me, filling me with one strong, dominant thrust.

His hands are on my back and hips, his fingers pressing into me as we kiss, hard and hungry. I writhe on him, moaning as I slide up and down his length, feeling him swell inside me. He grabs my wrists, shoving them behind my back and wrapping his belt around them. I groan, grinding down harder as our lips crush together.

Everything we are, everything we've fought for, is distilled into this single moment.

"I love you," I murmur, the words spilling out between kisses, each one more fervent than the last.

He pulls back just enough to look at me, his gaze fiercely possessive. "I love you too," he says, his voice low and rough, every word a promise.

The music swells around us, wrapping us in its melody, and I let myself get lost in it.

In him.

In *us*.

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EPILOGUE

TAKESHI

I SLIP through the mansion's dark halls, the place reeking of dust and neglect. It makes sense: his staff and his guards are long gone.

The power's out, shadows stretching long and silent across the bare floors. Various thieves have already picked the place over—paintings ripped from the walls, glass shattered, drawers dumped out and looted. But I'm not here to pillage or steal.

I'm here to settle a debt.

It took every ounce of patience I had to wait. To know that each passing day would make Miyamoto dread it more, anticipate it, knowing that his end was coming.

Tonight, the wait is over.

I find him huddled near the fireplace in the empty library in a disheveled old suit, looking lost, beaten. When he hears me, he jerks up, his body tense, like he's going to bolt.

Pathetic.

I grab a dusty porcelain vase from a nearby shelf and hurl it at him, watching it shatter against his shoulder. He stumbles forward and yelps, crashing to the floor.

I walk toward him, drawing my sword. The sound echoes through the library and he whirls to stare at me with horror, his face turning white.

He begins babbling, a mess of pleas and half-sobbed apologies, desperate for mercy that he knows in his heart I won’t show him. I step closer, blade in hand, perfectly calm. “You knew this was coming, didn’t you?”

He looks up at me, pale as a corpse, barely able to hold my gaze. He’s a shell of the man who tried to play Machiavelli. I don’t bother hiding my disgust.

“Tell me, Katō-san,” I say, voice low. “Are you familiar with the samurai tradition of *seppuku*? You must be.” I reach into my jacket, pulling out the *tantō* blade and tossing it at his feet.

Back in the day, when a samurai was defeated in battle, the honorable way out was for him to disembowel himself, proving his bravery and commitment even in defeat.

As if any of those words are applicable here.

“This is your chance,” I spit. “Die with some shred of honor, or I’ll take your head off myself.”

He stares at the blade, eyes wide, then looks back at me. He’s scrambling now, switching tactics. “Please,” he grovels. “I can give you anything—make you a king in Tokyo.”

I laugh.

His face twists and he tries a different approach, spitting out the words like venom. “You think this city will welcome you after this?” he sneers.

I smile coldly. “I think this city will *bow* to me.” I step closer, the edge of my blade grazing his skin. “Last chance.”

"I've already lit the fires," Miyamoto hisses. "War is coming for you, and the Ishida-kai will destroy you and your family."

My jaw tenses. “Ishida-san has no fucking *idea* what’s coming for him," I growl, leaning down to level my gaze with his. “*Me*.”

I straighten up again, twisting the *katana* in my hand. “Now, are you going to do it yourself, or am I going to—”

Desperation twists across his face, and he reaches for the *tantō*, eyes wild with last-ditch effort.

But he's slow.

I stomp down on his hand, pinning it to the floor. With one swift, almost bored swing, I bring my sword down.

Miyamoto's body slumps to the ground as his head rolls away behind the couch. I straighten, wiping the blood from my blade on the faded drapes as I turn to gaze through the windows at the city spread out in the distance.

Neon glints like a field of stars.

Somewhere out there, Kolya Ishida is plotting, utterly ignorant of what's coming for him.

But I know his weakness now.

And I'm coming for her.

* * *

The Memento Mori series will continue with Takeshi's story in *Emperor of Havoc*.

Haven't gotten enough of Damian and Hana?
Get their extra scene here, or type this link into your browser:
https://BookHip.com/KSBPZQJ

This isn't an epilogue or continuation to *Emperor of Lust.* But this extra hot "follow-up" story is guaranteed to keep the spice going.

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DEVIANT HEARTS

Thank you so much for reading *Emperor of Lust*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, the Jagger Cole universe continues with Takeshi's story in *Emperor of Havoc*. You can also get a glimpse of some of the other characters mentioned in this series (the Drakos and Kildare families) in the Dark Hearts series, starting with *Deviant Hearts*, a dark enemies-to-lovers, forced marriage mafia romance. There's even a sneak peek of that book on the following pages for you.

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.
www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Deviant Hearts*.

* * *

Chapter 1
Neve

Fuck. Me.

He’s doing it.

Again.

I tell myself not to look. I tell myself to keep my eyes on the book and the study notes in front of me, because NYU seriously *does not care* what my last name is, and they’ll have no issue failing my sorry ass from my government and public policy master’s program if I don’t focus.

I tell myself it’s high time I bought some fucking curtains, so I can avoid this…*distraction.*..since it’s clearly shaping up to be a frequent thing.

But the problem with telling yourself not to do something that deep down you *really* want to?

The “deep down” part always wins. *Always*.

Or, at least it does with me. Which might say more about me and my own self-control…or lack thereof.

No. It’s definitely easier to go ahead and blame my new neighbor across the street. Let’s go with that.

I mean, *he’s* the one that keeps walking around naked in a penthouse made out of fucking *glass*.

Mark Twain once said, “There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable.” But, smart as he was, it’s clear Mr. Twain never had the neighbor I do. If he had, I’m pretty sure he’d have taken a whole lot of the whimsical “charm” out of that statement.

And sure enough, despite my best—or, okay, let’s be real, *mediocre*—efforts, soon enough, my gaze shifts from the notes in front of me to the man across the steel canyon from me.

Sweet Jesus.

He’s a freaking *god*. Tall and lean, and as muscled as a superhero. Shoulders and arms built to take away your ability to speak. Chiseled abs and those grooved hip-muscle things that I don’t even know what they’re called but they seem to be evolution’s way of making even smart women go fucking stupid.

Tattoos for days. Deeply tanned, Mediterranean skin, with a shadow on his razor-sharp jaw, and dark, *perfectly* tousled hair.

It's like living next to a goddamn Avenger who models for Armani while he's not busy saving the world from Thanos. No wonder he seems to have a problem with wearing clothes.

Heat floods my cheeks as I glance across the chasm between us. The morning light streams right through his penthouse, which is another annoyance.

Two months ago, my place was a dream apartment. A modern, light-filled loft at the top of a thirty-eight-story building. So high up that I didn't even have neighbors who could see into this place.

Is it more than a little ostentatious? Well…*yeah*. It's a thousand square feet of modern glass and steel on the West Side overlooking the Hudson. Was it absurdly expensive? Also, yeah. But there's gotta be *some* perks that come with being a Kildare to offset the downsides.

Issues making friends my entire life because my family is the Irish Mafia? Check. Problems having any sort of romantic relationships, for the same reason? Check and double check.

Aimless, drifting, utterly unsure of what I want to do with my life, because what exactly *do* mafia princesses do all day?

Check and fucking mate.

For the last year, I've been throwing myself into this government and policy master's program at NYU. But after that? Who knows. For now, I'm at least finally living on my own.

But life still sort of feels just like something I'm drifting through.

Truth be told, I was pretty sure my uncle Cillian was going to shut down my plans of finally moving out of the main family house and into this place. Especially with all the violence and upheaval in the last few months as the fighting between the Irish Kildare and Greek Drakos families escalated to world-war-three levels.

But my dream apartment and the building itself are incredibly secure and easy to defend. Especially when there's a rotating crew of four Kildare guys constantly guarding the lobby—much, I'm sure, to the chagrin of the other tenants.

Yet that whole "dream apartment" thing quickly lost some of its luster when they completed construction on the building across the street, next to mine. The building with the double-height glass penthouse that rises two floors *above* my thirty-eighth-floor apartment, that now blocks part of my view of the river.

His glass penthouse.

The man with the god-like body and the aversion to clothing. The man with the sensual tattoos and the swarthy, lean look of a Trojan warrior.

The man I have absolutely *no* business gawking at and thinking these sort of sinful thoughts about. Not just because it makes me a spying creep. But because he's a man I should have every reason in the world to hate.

He's not just my neighbor.

He's the *enemy*.

But try telling that to my under-satisfied libido and clenched thighs.

At last he moves from where he's been standing at the windows staring out at the Hudson with a cup of coffee in his hand and, mercifully, disappears from view.

Finally.

Distraction gone, I manage to pull my attention back to the study notes in front of me. Nina Simone croons over the sound system as I lose myself in the books. But a handful of minutes later, movement at my peripheral vision drags my eyes back up again. He's back. And wonder of wonders, he's dressed—in an impeccably-tailored dark suit. I yank my eyes back to my notes, then back to him.

This time, he's finally gone.

I exhale slowly, swallowing as I drag my attention back to my government policy books. I don't have time for these distractions. Not when I've got two weeks of notes to memorize and *also* a Kildare family meeting in…

I glance at my phone and groan.

Shit. In, basically, now. As if on cue, the buzzer goes off for my front door. Sighing, I close the books and pad across the living room. I glance through the peephole out of habit. Then I grin and open the door wide.

Eilish's brows furrow as she looks me up and down.

"Neve, what the fuck. We're going to be late, and you're not even dressed?"

My brow scrunches as I glance down at myself.

"You need to get *dressed*, Neve," my younger sister sighs.

"I'm dressed!"

"Those look like pajamas."

"So? They're comfy." I raise my gaze past her to the tall guy standing behind her. "Cas, back me up here."

But Castle just shakes his sandy blonde head and lifts a muscled shoulder apologetically.

"Cillian wants you dressed properly, kid."

I roll my eyes at the word kid, but I let it go. Castle's been Eilish's and my —I suppose the word is "bodyguard"—for the last ten years. Growing up, all of our friends drooled over the six-and-a-half-foot tall, built-like-a-quarterback shadow that was always with us. That, or they were *sure* one of us was going to get scandalously tangled up in some steamy, x-rated tryst with him.

But, *no way*. No way to an "eww" degree. Yes, Castle is ridiculously handsome. But to Eilish and me he's always been the older brother we never had. And we're the perpetually annoying-but-loveable kid sisters *he* never had.

Which is why he can still get away with calling me “kid” or doing annoying big brother-type shit like messing up my hair even though I’m twenty-four.

I stick my bottom lip out, giving Castle my best puppy-dog eyes.

“But *Caaaastle*—”

“Enough with the waif eyes. Go get changed, Neve,” he grunts. “Your uncle isn’t exactly one to mince words, and he wants you dressed up.”

“But *why*? What’s this meeting even about?”

Eilish shrugs. “Beats me. Bet it has something to do with your new neighbor, though.”

Annoyed as I am to be forced to give up my sweatpants and hoodie, I know Castle well enough to know there’s no way he’s budging on this. And I know my Uncle Cillian well enough to know that one, there’s no wiggle room here, but more importantly two, there’s a reason he wants us looking sharp. Even if I have no idea what that reason is.

I root around in my disaster zone of a bedroom, stripping out of my hoodie and sweats and pulling on clean underwear and clothes. Five minutes later, I emerge in a green puff-sleeve top, black jeans, and heeled black boots, shoving my long red hair up in a loose ponytail.

Eilish, predictably, rolls her eyes.

“*That’s* dressed up?”

“I could go back to my extensive sweatpants collection, if you prefer.”

Eilish sighs, reaching up to smooth the single errant lock of blonde back behind her ear. She’s right. I’m still fairly casually dressed. Especially next to my princess of a little sister, who looks like a modern-day blonde Jackie-O in a pink Chanel jersey dress and heels, her hair and makeup immaculate. At *nine-thirty in the freaking morning*, no less. So sue me, this is the best I can do.

Finally, she grins as she rolls her eyes again.

“Okay, *okay*, fine. C’mon. We shouldn’t be late.”

“Hey, I’m not the one getting bent out of shape about the dress code.”

I glance to Castle for at least a chuckle. But he’s looking even more grim and stoic than usual.

“What’s up with you?”

He shrugs, turning away.

“Just don’t want to be late. C’mon.”

I frown. “Cas, seriously, what’s up?”

There’s a glint in his eye when he glances back at me for half a second. But still, he gives nothing away.

“Let’s get where we need to go, kid,” he murmurs quietly.

I shoot Eilish a puzzled look as we follow him out the door. But she just shakes her head and gives me an “I have no idea” face. Given that my sister is incapable of being anything but cheerful, talking shit about *anyone* no matter how terrible they are, or lying in any capacity, it’s clear she’s also in the dark.

Twenty minutes later, Castle is pulling the white armored Range Rover up to the curb outside O’Bannon’s. The midtown Irish pub has been our uncle’s temporary center of business and war room since he moved to New York from London a few months ago, after the petty scuffles between the Kildare family and the Drakos family turned into all-out war.

After things went nuclear, when the Drakos family lost Vasilis, their head of operations in New York, and we lost Declan, the head of ours.

Declan, as in, *my father*.

The side door to O’Bannon’s, which leads up to the second floor where Cillian’s been holding court the last few months, is guarded by four Kildare men with not-so-hidden bulges of sidearms under their dark jackets. One nods stiffly at Castle and goes to open the door to the bar for us, when suddenly there’s the sound of a car screeching to a stop at the curb behind us.

The hairs on the back of my neck start to prickle as I slowly turn to frown at the black Escalade. And when the back door opens, and a man in a dark suit with pure malice on his face steps out, my heart leaps into my throat.

"*RUN*!" I scream as I grab Eilish's arm, whirling to bolt into O'Bannon's before the bullets start flying.

Because I know damn well who the man who just stepped out of the SUV is. Hades Drakos: a dangerous, certifiable psychopath and second-in-command of the Drakos family. Basically, public enemy number two if your last name is Kildare.

As I yank my sister towards the door, I realize something odd: the guards aren't launching into action. Castle himself is just standing there, glowering at the second-oldest Drakos brother as he grins savagely at me.

"Cas?" I hiss hoarsely, my pulse thudding. Clearly, Eilish is just as out of the loop as I am, because she's still cowering behind me, shaking.

"It's okay, kid," Castle mutters quietly. He glances behind me, his look softening as it frequently does when it comes to Eilish. Which is totally understandable. I'm the sister with a chip on her shoulder and an axe to grind. Eilish is the sweet one. The one who's arguably *way* too soft for this dangerous world that we live in.

"But that's—!"

"*Boo*," Hades chuckles thinly, winking at me in a way that sends a shiver up my spine. He rolls his muscled shoulders, the tattoo ink that curls up from inside the collar of his dress shirt rippling as he buttons his jacket.

"Well, Pillow Fort. Can we go inside now?"

The creases in Castle's brow deepen as he squares off with Hades.

"It's Castle."

"I really don't give a shit. Are we doing this or not?"

I frown as I turn to Castle again.

"Doing *what*, Cas? What are we—"

“Open the doors.”

I stiffen at the deep, powerful voice that rumbles behind me. A voice that causes a tingling sensation to creep over my skin, electrifying me as deeply as it scares me. The feeling grows and throbs deeper and warmer, until I can feel my cheeks reddening as something wicked pools between my thighs.

I turn, and my core clenches tight.

It’s *him*.

My neighbor. The forbidden distraction. The man with the god-like body built for sin who I have no business fantasizing about, but God help me I do.

Because my neighbor isn’t just eye candy.

He’s *Ares fucking Drakos*, the brand-new king of the entire Drakos family.

I’m vaguely aware of more people getting out of a second and a third SUV that pull up behind the first—the other siblings in the Drakos family, and various other guards. As the seconds tick by, and as Ares’ piercing, dark-eyed gaze continues to stab right into me, the question of why he’s here fades into the background.

And the question of why he’s looking at me like he’s trying to figure out how to swallow me in one bite comes to the fore.

“Inside, all of you,” he growls quietly, his voice filled with unquestioned power. Two of his three brothers—Hades and Kratos—and his sister Calliope glance at me with slightly raised eyebrows as they file past me into O’Bannon’s. Their guards and the Kildare men follow.

Castle clears his throat, taking Eilish by the shoulders as if to escort her inside. I know I should go too. But somehow, I’m stuck. It’s as if my gaze is bound to Ares. Or as if *his* gaze has me pinned to the very pavement beneath my feet.

We’re on a busy New York sidewalk. And yet, it’s as if we’re suddenly in a bubble of silence. As if the entire rest of the world fades away to a low

hum, until I can actually hear my throat tightening when he starts to walk towards me.

I shiver when he stops right in front of me, looming over me. I want to sneer at him. Or spit on his fancy shoes. Or worse. But all I can do is purse my lips and glare at him.

Ares smirks down into my eyes.

“They haven’t told you yet, have they?”

I swallow.

“Told me *what*?”

One of his dark brows raises in amusement.

“Never mind. You’ll find out soon enough. You know who I am?”

“Of course I know who you are.”

“I mean, apart from being your neighbor.”

I stiffen, desperately trying to swallow back the heat from my face.

“Neighbor?” My voice cracks. Not badly, but enough. “I hadn’t realized.”

The dangerous and lethally-attractive man looming over me smiles ruthlessly, coldly.

“You don’t recognize me?”

“I—I guess not.”

“Would it help if I took my clothes off?”

Dear. GOD.

My face turns as hot as the sun as I pray for a sinkhole to open at my feet.

“I—I—”

“The meeting is about to start.”

He lets his lips curl slightly, giving me the faintest flash of white teeth. Then, without blinking, he starts to move past where I'm still glued to the sidewalk.

He pauses right next to me, and my breath sucks in as he leans down, so close I can smell the woodsy, elegant scent of his cologne and feel the heat of his breath in my ear.

"Oh, and Neve…" he growls quietly. "Peach isn't your color."

My brows knit as I start to turn towards him in confusion.

"I'm not wearing—"

Oh God.

Yes, I am.

My mind flashes back to rooting around in my light-filled bedroom as I yanked off my hoodie and sweatpants. Where I pulled out the green top and black jeans…

After putting on the laundry-day pair of peach-colored panties.

I'm not the only person spying on their neighbor.

Son of a bitch.

Ares clears his throat, straightening up and buttoning his jacket as I melt into a puddle of mortification.

"See you in there, princess."

Chapter 2
Ares

Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.

Everyone knows that. Except kings usually know they're going to *be* kings long before they take over the throne. They prepare for it their whole lives, train for it. They're ready when the day arrives.

I wasn't. Because I was never *meant* to be king. I'm Lancelot, burning and pillaging and fucking his way through the countryside. *Not* King fucking Arthur.

But life, or fate, or karma, or whatever you want to call it, had other plans for me.

Nine months ago, my father Aeneas, the head of the entire Drakos Family, died at the hands of my older brother, Atlas. My father was a hard, brutal man. But Atlas was unhinged. And power-hungry.

Not to mention a knuckle-dragging fucking idiot.

His "reign" lasted less than three weeks. Then he was killed waging a pointless war against a man with deep pockets and dangerous friends, all over a woman.

It's an absurd story. Years and years ago, Atlas had once been betrothed to this woman's mother, Saoirse —an Irish Mafia princess and Cillian Kildare's sister. But Saoirse ended up having a fling with someone else, producing a daughter, Rose—who went on to end up with this man with the deep pockets and dangerous friends.

Atlas decided the daughter of the bride he'd been cheated out of should be his. Obviously, the man with whom she lived and shared a bed disagreed. And when the dust had settled, my brother was dead, and I was king in his place.

Sometimes I'm convinced life really is a Greek tragedy.

Or a comedy, depending on how cynical you are.

But, heavy as the burden to lead is, I was born for this. All my siblings and I were. Living under our father's rule may have been a lesson in brutality and viciousness, but it hardened us. It prepared us to lead and to conquer. When I took the throne that was unexpectedly thrust upon me, I was ready.

And then, of course, life threw me another curveball.

My siblings and I were all born here in New York. But my father ultimately preferred England, where he'd grown up. So that's where the real seat of the

Drakos empire was for the last twelve years, while my uncle Vasilis oversaw our operations back here in New York City.

Until four months ago, when, as I say, the proverbial shit hit the proverbial fan.

Our family and the Irish Kildare family have never gotten along. There's generations of bad blood between us, going back who even remembers how long. At one point, there was at least a half-truce—when Saoirse was promised to Atlas. And even when that marriage fell through, things at least cooled off between our families for the next twenty years or so.

Until things went sideways, *badly*.

I've heard it started as a potential peace agreement. Vasilis sat down with Declan Kildare, Cillian's half-brother and the head of Kildare operations here in New York. But whatever "peace" they were trying to hammer out shattered when a gunfight broke out between them, killing them both.

It should mean all-out war. A bloodbath in the streets. The final showdown between the Kildare and Drakos families until only one is left standing.

Luckily, neither Cillian nor I is suicidal.

Cillian *is* a fucking psychopath, there's no question about that. He's been described more than once as the kind of man who wants to watch the world burn because he enjoys the smell of the smoke. And I think that's a fair assessment. But either out of self-interest or greed, we've managed to work out an arrangement.

It's time to settle this bullshit between our families once and for all.

And the key to settling it is currently glaring daggers at me from across the room. Clearly, nobody's told her yet. But she's it.

We're it.

My eyes narrow, my mouth tightening to a line as I let my gaze drag across the scowl on Neve Kildare's face.

It makes sense that she hates me. Even if neither of us had anything to do with the violence of a few months ago, at the end of the day, my uncle and

her father killed each other. From what I gather, neither she nor her sister Eilish was very close with Declan.

But still. Blood is blood.

And soon, *we'll* be blood.

Joined.

Bound together forever.

My jaw grinds as my mind flashes to other more literal ways I could bind the stunning and furious-looking redhead across the table from me.

My tempting, sinfully attractive neighbor who *really* ought to have some curtains put up in her bedroom.

The one who's been spying on me. The one *I've* been spying on right back. I'm just much better at it than she is.

Desire makes my cock swell as my mind flashes back to earlier today. When I was standing in my kitchen rinsing out my coffee cup, staring through the windows above my sink…

Into her *bedroom*. Where I watched her strip off her sweatpants and hoodie and prowl naked around her disaster of a room until she found some other clothes to pull on—

"You realize she's going to bite your dick off the first chance she gets, right?"

My jaw grinds and my train of thought is interrupted as I glance sideways at my younger brother, Hades, sitting next to me on our side of the conference table.

When we were kids, I used to roll my eyes at the way our father named all of us after Greek gods, titans, and muses—Atlas, Ares, Hades, Deimos, Kratos, and our sister, Calliope. But as we've gotten older, we've all weirdly grown into the mythological figures we were named for. Hades especially.

There’s a darkness and an edge in all of us—our father made damn sure of that with his heavy hand and strict discipline. But Hades—named for the god of the dead, the king of the underworld—always seems to revel in it. The sadistically sociopathic glint I can currently see in his eyes is a testament to that darkness.

He shrugs at my cold silence.

“You know I’m right.”

“What I know is this is neither the time nor the place, Hades,” I grunt back.

My brother shrugs again, pushing his longish hair back from his face. He got our mother’s piercing ice-blue eyes. I got our father’s dark, brooding ones.

Behind him and towering above all of us despite being younger than Hades and me, Kratos mimics my stern glare at our brother.

“It’s a good arrangement,” he rumbles in that mountainous way of his.

I nod to my brother. Kratos is a good, steady voice of reason. Though Deimos, who’s holding down the fort back in London, is the true peacekeeper of all of us siblings.

A peacekeeper in the style of a nuclear deterrent, that is, not Gandhi.

“Oh, I agree,” Hades smiles brittly. “It’s good for peace and will bring an end to bloodshed. I mean, it’s not *my* cock that’s going to get chewed off.”

“Could you *attempt* to not be a dick for just two minutes, Hades?”

I turn to smirk quietly at Calliope, my sharp-tongued little sister, sitting on my other side. The youngest and smallest of all of us, and yet somehow, she’s the law-keeper. She’s got our grandmother Dimitra’s genes.

Across the room, the group of Kildare men who’ve been talking quietly amongst themselves finally come find seats at the table. Cillian and I catch each other’s eyes, and we nod.

This wasn’t his idea, or mine. It was Dimitra who first put it forward: a way to put the hostilities between our families and our subsidiaries behind us for

good. As she pointed out, the closest we've ever gotten to peace before was when Atlas was set to marry Saoirse.

What better way to settle our differences than by becoming family?

But when I glance at Neve sitting across the table, still glaring pure malice at me, it's clear her uncle still hasn't told her what's about to happen.

This should be interesting.

Cillian clears his throat, sitting back in his seat as his green eyes slice across the room, silencing it with a look.

"I'm not one for fancy speeches, so I'll get straight to it. We're here because the hostilities between our organizations have reached an untenable level. Rivalries are one thing. But we've crossed too many lines, and there's too much blood in the streets."

He pulls a silver cigarette case out of his breast pocket, opens it, slips one between his lips, and lights it deftly with a flick of a silver Zippo. Smoke curls around the Irishman's head as his glinting green eyes pierce through it.

"I'm not going to get all weepy and sentimental. The truth is, the reason all of us are here is that war will mean ruin to both the Kildare and Drakos families. It will destroy our business interests. And there are already enough jackals circling, waiting for the first sign of weakness to strike. The Bolinaro Cartel. The Carveli Family. The Reznikov Bratva, not to mention their allies."

Cillian's icy gaze lands on me.

I don't blink.

"So in the interest of *not* getting hit from behind by an enemy while we bicker like schoolboys, Ares and I have come to an arrangement—one that will end these hostilities forever, and make both of our families stronger than ever as a united front."

I watch Neve's face scrunch up in confusion as she turns to frown at her uncle.

Oh, this is about to get good.

“A *united* front?”

Goddamnit, Ezio.

I frown quietly as I lean forward, turning to stab my gaze down the length of the table to where Ezio Adamos is glaring daggers at Cillian.

“Please, *go on* about this fucking *united* front we’re supposed to have with—”

“Ezio.”

My voice is neither raised nor very forceful. But it cuts through the room all the same, quickly silencing him. He stares at me, fury and pain boiling behind his eyes.

The Adamos family is a subsidiary, tributary family to ours. Their allegiance has been pledged to the Drakos family for generations, and the way I can see Ezio about to suicide bomb this entire discussion has my jaw grinding harshly.

But I get it. And I feel for him.

Ezio’s only son, Jason, was at the meeting where Vasilis Drakos and Declan Kildare opened fire.

He was also killed.

“Ares, *please*,” he hisses at me, pain glinting in his eyes. “You cannot seriously be considering allying ourselves with these backstabbing, honorless *Micks*—”

“*Be silent*,” I snap.

I’m not completely heartless. I understand he’s in pain. But this is decidedly *not* the place for it. Or the time for him to start hurling slurs.

Cillian clears his throat, eying Ezio across the table.

“What would…*ease* your grief?”

Fuck.

This isn’t Cillian being diplomatic.

This is him going for the throat, and Ezio’s about to walk right into his trap.

“What would *ease my fucking grief*?!” He snaps at the Irishman.

“I don’t believe I stuttered, Mr. Adamos. What’s the going rate on grief these days? Ten thousand? Twenty?”

Goddammit.

Ezio lurches to his feet, his face a mask of seething rage as he whips his head around to glare at me.

“This is insulting! I will *not* sit here—”

“Yes, you will.” My gaze hardens on him.

I’ll tell him again how sorry I am for his loss later. Not here.

“You. *Will*.”

His mouth thins to a line as he points a finger across the table at Cillian.

“This piece of shit *dares* to offer me *money*?! I lost a SON, Ares!”

“And I lost a fucking *brother*,” Cillian snaps coldly. “But here we are. And you can either get on board, or go find a nice length of rope somewhere and join your boy.”

Yeah, they’re not exaggerating when they call Cillian a sadistic sociopath.

The room goes silent. Ezio’s face turns purple. He looks like he’s seriously considering jumping across the table and murdering Cillian with his bare hands. But instead, he spins on his heel, glares at me viciously, and storms from the room.

“*Well, I have to say. This is TWICE as much fun as I imagined it would be*,” Hades mutters next to me.

Cillian sighs, drumming his fingers on the table as his gaze drags back to me.

“You need to keep your dogs on a tighter leash.”

“He’ll keep to the truce,” I growl back.

My eyes swivel to Neve again, drinking in her fiery red hair, the dusting of freckles across her nose, and the sharp green eyes so like her uncle’s, still squinting in confusion.

“And you?” I murmur, pulling my gaze from Neve to Cillian. “You’ll keep to our agreement?”

He takes a long, slow drag of his cigarette, and then nods slowly.

“We will.”

He turns to his niece, and my eyes lock onto her as well.

“Neve,” Cillian sighs. “There’s no easy way to say this. And if there was any other way…” he shrugs. “But there isn’t. Not one that doesn’t end in more blood.”

Her brow furrows deeper.

“Uncle, what are you talking about? And why am I—”

“You’re going to marry Ares Drakos, Neve. That will be the final truce to forever end this bullshit between our families.”

The room goes *silent*. Neve’s face turns white as she stares dumbfounded at her uncle. She blinks, frowning as if willing him to laugh at the spectacular joke he’s just made.

But this is no joke.

This is happening. And as reluctant and unhappy as *I* am about it, I’m guessing from the look of horror that spreads across her face that she’s twice as reluctant and unhappy.

“*What*?!”

Cillian takes one last pull from his smoke, exhaling toward the ceiling before dropping the butt in the mug of coffee in front of him.

“It’s the only way, Neve. You’re going to marry Ares, and that’s final.”

She blinks, shaking as her mouth forms silent words, none getting out.

“No—”

“I’m afraid this isn’t a discussion, Neve,” he says quietly, a flicker of regret and rare-for-Cillian apology on his face.

“Like hell it’s—!”

“*Neve*,” he growls thickly. “It’s. Been. Decided.”

Slowly, her face pale as a ghost, Neve turns to let her fierce green eyes stab into mine like knives.

I stare right back.

My little peeping Tom of a neighbor.

My enemy.

My wife.

“I think you’ll find, Neve, this is the best way to settle all of the bad blood—”

“And I think *you’ll* find yourself, *Ares*, with a knife in your throat if you come anywhere fucking near me.”

She stands abruptly, her eyes wild with fear and anger.

“Neve,” Cillian hisses quietly. “It’s *done*—”

“Oh, we’re done, all right.”

Without another word, she whirls, storms to the conference room doors, and blows right through them.

Shit.

“So,” Hades sighs, his voice dripping with amusement. “You ready to discuss body armor for your dick yet, or do you wanna talk bachelor party?”

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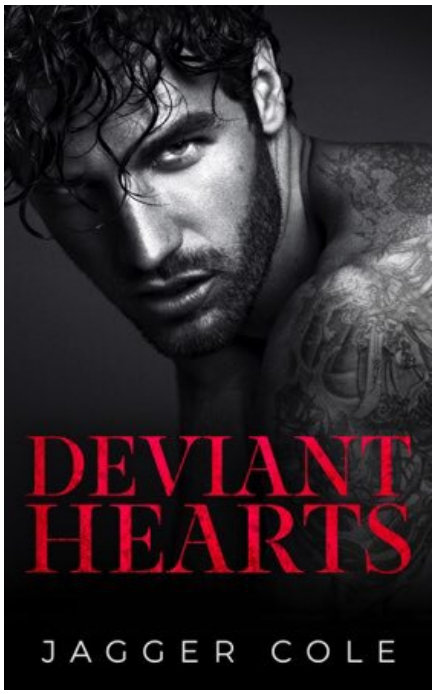

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A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at
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